





FRANK MERRIWELL'S COURAGE

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"Frank Merriwell's Schooldays," "Frank Merriwell's Trip West,"
"Frank Merriwell's Chums," "Frank Merriwell's Foes,"
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Frank Merriwell's Courage



"Stand back!" he cried again. "Look at this! Now—now touch me, if you dare!" (See page 52)

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FRANK MERRIWELL'S COURAGE.

CHAPTER I.

TIED TO THE TRACK.

"Listen, boys!"

"What is it, Frank?"

"I thought I heard a cry."

The speakers were Frank Merriwell, one of the most popular youths that ever graduated at Yale, and his chums, Harry Rattleton, Jack Diamond, Bruce Browning, and the colored boy, Toots. They were mounted on bicycles and were making a tour across the continent. The night had fallen, and they were all pedaling away when Frank's warning arrested them and they slackened their speed and listened.

From far away came the wailing shriek of a locomotive, brought to their ears by the favorable wind.

"That's what you heard, Frank," declared Jack Diamond.

"I do not think so," said Frank Merriwell. "What I seemed to hear had a human sound, and a sound of distress, at that."

"Fo' de Lawd's sakes!" gurgled Toots, the colored boy, whose eyes seemed almost to gleam in the gloom. "Don' yo' pay no 'tenshun teh anyfing dat yo' heah hollerin' in de dark. If yo' does, chilluns, dere ain't no tellin' what will cotch yeh. De spookses am alwus kerhootin' on dis kine ob a night."

"Oh, say!" exclaimed Harry Rattleton, who had a strange habit of mixing his words; "you sake me mick—I mean you make me sick, Toots! You are always thinking of 'spookses.' Some time you'll be scared to death by your own shadow."

Bruce Browning, who was following along behind, wearily working at the pedals of his bicycle, said nothing. It would require some extra exertion for him to say anything, for he was not only fat, but lazy, though brimful of good-nature.

"Gwan!" cried the colored boy. "Don' yo frow no swinuations dis way, Mistah Rattleton! I done don' lek it, an' I's libul teh git mighty ma-ad. When I's

mad, I's ba-ad. I want yeh ter know I's no ordinary nigger, but I's a cullud pussin ob——"

"Be still!"

The command came from Frank, and it was plain he was listening once more.

"I know I heard that cry again," he declared. "I was not deceived this time. It was—— There it is!"

They all heard it plainly enough. Certainly it seemed like a human cry of dire distress—an appeal for help.

"Golly sakes teh goodness!" panted Toots. "Dat's a spook suah's yeh libbin', Marser Frank! I knows de soun'."

"I believe the cry did come from the lips of a human being!" exclaimed Diamond. "But I could not tell the direction——"

"Help!"

"There's no mistake this time!" cried Frank, as they plainly heard the faint shout. "It comes from away off this way somewhere!"

He waved his hand to the right, and again the wailing whistle of the approaching locomotive was heard, more distinct than before.

A moment later the young bicyclists came to a railroad crossing, where the road ran through a small cut.

Then it was that, for the fourth time, the wind brought that appeal to Frank Merriwell's ears.

Immediately he vaulted from his bicycle, which he ran out beside the road, depositing it upon the grass.

Not being aware of his intention, the other boys passed on, and dismounted more slowly. By the time they turned about Frank had left his wheel on the grass and was bounding away up the railroad track, his feet sounding on the cross-ties.

"Well, bress mah soul!" cried the darky. "If dat ain't jes' lek dat dar chile, I dunno!"

"Follow him!" cried Jack. "He may get into some sort of a scrape! We must be on hand to stand with him."

"That's rust jite—I mean it's just right!" cried Rattleton, as he gave his bicycle a run toward the ditch, and let it go. "Come on, fellers!"

"Say," panted Bruce Browning, from a distance, "what's all this mean, anyhow? I'm no acrobat, and it'd take a circus chap to imitate Merry in his movements."

Frank ran like a deer, hearing the locomotive whistle sound yet nearer as he dashed along.

The cries became plainer, although they seemed strangely weak, as if the person uttering them were in great distress.

Merriwell realized that he might be running into danger, but the thought did not cause him to hesitate a moment. He held himself ready for anything that might happen.

The person who uttered the cries was much farther from the highway than Frank had supposed at first, the sound being brought to the boy's ears by the aid of the wind.

Into some dark woods the running boy sped, and he knew he must be close upon the unfortunate who was calling for aid.

Frank did not answer the cries, having a fancy that it might be better to remain silent.

The train was coming nearer and nearer along the road, as he could tell by the occasional blasts from its whistle.

For a little time there were no cries, and then, almost beneath the boys' feet, the appeal went forth once more.

"Help! help! Save me!"

Then it was that the running lad came to a sudden halt, seeing a dark object that was stretched across the track.

"Who's there?" he asked, approaching with greater caution. "What is the matter with you?"

"Quick!" panted a voice that was husky and weak from so much shouting. "The express is coming! Help me!"

"Why don't you get up?"

"I can't! I am tied to the track!"

With a cry of horror, the boy leaped forward, bending over the prostrate man. The shrill whistle of the approaching train cut the air, and the rails began to hum under the sound of wheels.

It took Merriwell but a moment to ascertain that the man told the truth—that he was bound to the track in such a manner that the wheels of the train would cut him in two if he were not released.

Far down the track a star gleamed redly, growing larger and brighter with each passing moment. Again the whistle of the locomotive came through the shuddering air.

"For the love of mercy, hurry!" shrieked the man. "The express is less than a mile away, and will be here inside of a minute! Don't try to untie the knots! Take a knife and cut the rope! It is the only way for you to save my life!"

Frank thrust his hand into his pocket, but, to his dismay, failed to find any knife there. With the utmost speed, he searched through other pockets, but with no better success.

"I have no knife!" he cried, in distress, as he saw that red star growing larger and larger, while it threw a gleam on the two iron rails that made them seem like threads of polished silver.

"Do something!" screamed the unfortunate wretch, as he writhed and twisted in agony. "If you don't do something in a moment, I am a dead man!"

Frank knew that well enough. The headlight of the approaching locomotive seemed like the glaring orb of some Cyclopean monster that was hastening to claim its human prey. The rails were humming louder and louder beneath the iron wheels.

Frank tore at the cords with his fingers, feeling sick at heart. The knots were drawn tight, and he realized

that it would be impossible for his fingers to loosen them in the few seconds that remained before the train would go roaring over the spot.

In that moment the boy found himself wondering how the man came to be bound to the track. Enemies—deadly enemies—must have tied him there.

It was too dark there in the cut through the black woods for the boy to see the man's face, but something told Frank that the unfortunate was rough and unkempt. Perhaps he discovered this by his sense of touch.

Nearer and nearer came the train, like the juggernaut of destruction. It seemed to fascinate Frank, who remained kneeling by the helpless man, staring at the approaching light, and fumbling in a numb sort of way with the knots.

The man shrieked again, and his struggles were frightful in their intensity. His breast rose and fell with mighty panting breaths, the sound of which, whistling through his teeth, was like puffs of steam. Those breaths struck upon the boy's face and hands, seeming to scorch him like blasts from a furnace.

And yet, as the man twisted about, his flesh touched the hands of the boy, and Frank shuddered as if he had felt a corpse.

The situation was appalling to the lad, seeming to rob him of strength and will power. He felt as helpless as if hypnotized by the glaring eye of fire that gleamed through the night.

A horrible thought came to him. He could not arise, he could not escape from the track! He would remain there, and be crushed into a torn and shattered mass of flesh and bones! He was doomed to die with the helpless wretch who was tied to the track!

It actually seemed that something had robbed Frank Merriwell of his power to move, and he felt like one paralyzed. Fear was racking his heart, and yet he could not crawl off the track and escape death.

"What is the matter with you?" screamed the man. "Do something! Are you dreaming?"

"Yes," Frank fancied that he whispered, although, in truth, no sound came from his lips—"yes, I am dreaming—dreaming!"

It was a frightful dream—a dream of death! It

was a thousand times more horrible than the worst nightmare by which the boy had ever been assailed.

The humming rails gave forth a rhythmical sound, which the boy fancied was the triumphant song of the approaching monster. They quivered, as if they, too, were terrified by the frightful peril of two human beings.

And now the woods took up the roar, and it seemed that the dark trees were grim monsters of the night, exulting over the tragedy they were certain they should witness. Those trees held out their crooked, misshapen arms, and pointed in mockery at the man and the boy who were helpless in the path of the rushing iron demon with a soul of fire.

"In my pocket!" shrieked the man, "I believe I have a knife there! Quick—quick!"

"Eh?" said the boy, dully.

Again the man screamed forth the words.

In a moment, Frank seemed to throw off the spell that had fallen on him. His hand sought the man's pocket—found it.

"That's the one!" cried the unknown.

Frank found the knife—he had it out in a twinkling.

He paid no further attention to that redly-glaring eye, but he worked with swiftness. The knife was opened without the loss of a second, and then Frank slashed at the cords.

The iron monster seemed to bound forward with added speed, as if determined that its victims should not escape. It was now so near that the glare of its horrid eye fell upon them, and that light showed the boy how to work without making any false moves.

The engineer of the express could not have been attending to his duty just then, for no warning whistle pealed forth.

It did not seem possible for the boy to escape from the track of the train and save the man who had been bound there. Yet he did not abandon that man to his fate, but persisted in his effort to effect a rescue.

The glare of the headlight showed a determined look on the set face of the lad—showed a desperate purpose gleaming in his eyes.

One more slash of the knife, which was none too sharp, and the man was free. Then the boy caught

the helpless stranger by the shoulders and jerked him from the track.

Together they tumbled down the low embankment, rolled over and over, and lay panting and motionless beyond reach of those deadly wheels as the express thundered past.

CHAPTER II.

THE TRAMP'S STORY.

A wild scream from the engine, as if the creature were enraged at being robbed of its prey. It was whistling for the next crossing.

Frank sat up and looked after the express.

"Well," he coolly observed, "that was a rather close shave. What do you think about it, stranger?"

The man made no reply. He lay panting and helpless on the ground, seeming as yet unable to realize that he was saved.

"Cheer up, my friend," said the boy. "A miss is as good as a mile; but it is certain there would have been no miss in this case if you hadn't told me where to find the knife. I've lost my own knife, and I could not start the knots."

"Boy," panted the man, "you do not seem to realize what you have done!"

"Oh, yes I do," was the cheerful assurance. "I realize that I yanked you off the track just in time to

save you from being chopped into mince-meat by that train."

"You saved my life!"

"I believe you are right about that."

"But you nearly lost your own in the attempt."

"Oh, I don't know."

"I do! I saw your face by the light of the engine headlight, and the look there gave me hope, for there was something about that face which said you would not be frightened into deserting me. I saw a resolve to save me, or perish in the effort."

"Oh, I didn't propose to run away and leave you while there was a possible show for me to get you off. After I got hold of that knife, I felt sure I'd be able to clear you from the track."

"It was a remarkable thing for a boy to do."

"It rather strikes me that you regard it as too much of a trick. And as for its being done by a boy, I have found that some boys can do things the average man would not dare attempt."

"Cut my hands free," directed the man. "They still are tied behind my back."

Frank found the cord and severed it with the knife.

While he was thus employed, he heard his companions calling his name, making the woods ring with their shouts.

Merriwell answered, and a moment later he heard their feet on the cross-ties and their voices in excited conversation as they approached. Then they loomed up in the darkness close at hand.

"I tells yeh de sus-sus-spooks hab kerried him off fo' suah!" Toots was declaring. "It am no use teh look no funder fo' him. We'll nebber see dat boy no mo'. Poor Marser Frank!"

"Oh ut shup—I mean shut up!" cried Harry Rattleton, in disgust. "You are making me tired with your croaking about spooks!"

"I saw him near here," declared Jack Diamond—"I saw him as plain as I could by the glare of the headlight."

"I saw him, and I am sure that I saw some other person," said Jack. "You don't suppose they were run down by the train?"

"No," asserted Harry; "I seemed to see them get off the track just as the train was right upon them."

"Dat was a 'lucynashun!" asserted Toots. "Dat

suah was spookses yo' saw! Dat was a spook what kerried Marser Frank off!"

Just then Frank gave a most dismal groan, and, with a wild yell of terror, Toots clasped both arms about Harry's neck, and held on, his teeth rattling together.

"What I tole yeh?" he screamed. "Didn't I done tole yeh so? Dat was a spook, suah's yeh bawn, chil-luns! Don't let de critter tetch me! Good Mistah Debbil, don' yeh tetch me—please don' yeh tetch me! I nebber wanted teh come heah an' bodder yeh nohow! It was all de doin's ob dese foolish white boys. Dey done don' know no bettah, so, if yeh's got teh take anybody, Mistah Debbil, jes' yo' tek dem white boys, and let poah Toots go!"

"Let go, you black idiot!" he shouted. "Are you trying to strangle me! Get off my back! Why, you're trying to shin up my back the same as you would climb a tree!"

Then Frank burst into hearty laughter, but the sound echoed weirdly in the dark woods, the very trees seeming to fling back a hundred fiendish mockeries of that laugh.

As a result, all the strength seemed to leave Toots' arms, and he fell sprawling to the railroad track, where he lay, alternately praying and imploring "good Mistah Debbil" not to carry him off.

Both Jack and Harry had been startled at first by that burst of laughter, but they quickly recognized it as Merriwell's, and it gave them great relief.

"That's Merry, and he's all right," declared Bruce Browning, as he came puffing to the spot. "What sort of a trick has he been up to, anyway? If he has been playing roots on us, and has run us up here as a joke, I'll lift his scalp!"

"Just you try that little trick, Brownie," flung back Frank. "I will confess that you did fight me to a draw with hard gloves once on a time, but that was before you acquired such a vast abundance of flesh. You couldn't repeat the trick, my boy."

"If I whittle the flesh off during the rest of the trip the way I have thus far, I'll be in condition to give you a jolly good try by the time we reach San Francisco," retorted the big collegian, with a hearty laugh.

Frank arose to his feet, and assisted the rescued man

to arise. The man got upon his feet with some difficulty, as if his joints were rather stiff.

"Who is this with you, old fellow?" asked Jack, as he hastened to Frank's side. "I thought I saw two figures by the glare of the locomotive headlight."

"It is a man I found tied to the track," Merriwell explained.

The boys uttered exclamations of horror and astonishment.

"Tied to the track?" burst from Jack's lips. "Who tied him there?"

"That is what I have not had time to find out yet. I presume he will explain later on."

"Why, that was an attempt at murder!" cried Harry, excitedly.

"That's jest what it was, young gents," said the stranger, in a whining tone, which seemed a great change from his manner of speaking when he addressed Frank as the boy was trying to clear him from the track. "An' why them coves should do such a t'ing is what I don't understan'."

Frank instantly noted the change in the man's voice and language.

"Whom do you mean?" he asked. "Who tied you to the track?"

"Two gents by ther names o' Joyce an' Jones, sir."

"Then you know their names? That is good! Where do they live?"

"Well, young feller, they are travelers."

"Travelers? How is that?"

"That is on ther level. They don't have no reg'lar home nowhere, but they jest travel 'round ther country."

"How do they travel?"

"Oh, 'most any way that comes handy. Sometimes afoot, sometimes by rail, an' sometimes by water."

"Then you must mean that they are tramps."

"Some folks call 'em that," confessed the man. "Some folks says they're hobos. You kin take yer choice of names."

"And are you a tramp?"

"I am a pedestrian o' pleasure, gents. To be free wid yer, I don't much like ther name o' tramp or hobo, I started out ter see ther world some years ago, an' I've been lookin' it over ever sence. That's all, gents."

"And is this the man you found tied to the track?" cried Harry Rattleton, in astonishment.

"Were these men Joyce and Jones comrades of yours?" asked Frank.

"Well, they are travelers, like meself. I happened ter fall in wid 'em, an' then was travelin' westward, so we sailed along togedder. Joyce was a right jolly duck, what could tell stories, and Jones he could sing. They had a great way o' jollyin' ther ladies for a back-door feed, an' that made me warm ter 'em, gents."

"Did you have a falling out with them?"

"Not exactly," was the whimsical reply. "You see we was all kicked out back here about five mile at a water tank."

"Kicked out of what?"

"A box car, gents. As we didn't feel able ter travel in a Pullman sleeper, we was satisfied ter git inter an empty box on a freight, an' sail erlong that way. But ther brakemen tumbled ter our little game an' they come in on us. They stood us up an' went t'rough our pockets, but they didn't git only 'leven cents in change an' a old jackknife. That r'iled them, so they shot ther three o' us off ther car at ther first stop

Then we took ter hoofin' it along ter ther nex' town. I never t'ought there was anyt'ing in ther wind, an' I didn't suspect my companions o' any crooked game; but, jest as we was passin' t'rough these woods, gents, Joyce and Jones jumped on me. They had me onter me back in a wink, an' they tied me up afore I could make a squeal. It seemed like they was all ready for ther job, as they had ther t'ings ter do it wid.

“‘Gents,’ says I, in surprise, ‘w’at’s der racket? I don’t seem ter understand this game. What have I done that yer jumps onter me this way an’ ties me han’s behind me back? If it’s me wealth ye’re arter, pals,’ I continners, somewhat sourcastically, ‘ye’re welcome ter all der trainmen left me. In case that don’t satisfy ye, I give ye a check on me own sand bank.’

“But this sourcasm o’ mine don’t seem ter have any effect on them ducks. They don’t pay no ’tenshun ter me, but next I heard them kinder talkin’ over how they was ter finish me off. Jones, w’at could sing such beautiful songs, he was fer knockin’ me on der coco, an’ finishin’ me off widout delay; but Joyce, w’at tole ther funny stories, he didn’t seem ter like ther idee o’ doin’ ther job that way. Then they figgered out

that it was time fer ther express ter come erlong, an' they decided ter tie me ter ther track, an' let ther train do ther rest.

"Gents," said the self-confessed tramp, soberly, "I done my best ter reason wid dem duffers, but ther more I talks ther less good it does. Then I opens my face an' whoops a little, upon which they stops me mouth wid a gag. Then they ties me ter ther track, bids me farewell, and leaves me here."

The tramp paused in his narrative to wipe the cold perspiration from his face with his coat sleeve. Then he told how he tried to break his bonds, although he was thinking all the while that it must be a joke of his late companions. Finally he succeeded in getting the gag out of his mouth, and then he called for Joyce and Jones to come back and set him free.

In answer to his appeal the dark woods flung back dismal echoes, and an owl hooted derisively.

Then he began to think it possible there was no joke about it, and he had been abandoned to his doom. The thought made him frantic, for he knew the night express was nearly due, and he fell to shouting for help. He shouted till he was hoarse, but it seemed

that his appeal had not reached human ears. The distant whistle of the express filled his soul with unutterable terror, and he shrieked again and again.

After a time, he heard some one running toward him on the track. He continued to call, and Frank found him tied to the track. Then followed the thrilling rescue, which has been described.

"Young gent," said the tramp, in conclusion, addressing Frank, "if you hadn't come jest when yer did, them chaps would 'a done for me. You saved me life, an' I don't fergit that kind o' a turn."

"That is all right," said Merry, lightly.

"I ain't able ter pay yer money," said the man, slowly, "though I would be if I had what's me own by right."

"I don't want pay of any sort."

"How did yer happen ter come erlong where ye could hear me holler?"

Frank explained that, with his companions, he was making a bicycle trip from New York to San Francisco, and they were riding late that day to make up for lost time. Thus it came about that they were pedaling along the highway near enough to hear the

appeals for help which came from the lips of the helpless tramp.

"Well," said the man, slowly, "I has seen ther time w'en I said there warn't any God—there couldn't be a God; but it kinder seem ter-night as if He might 'a' hed somethin' ter do wid yer bein' near enough ter hear me holler. My name's Baldy Briggs. W'at's yourn?"

Frank gave his name, and Briggs continued:

"You ain't no odernary duck; you has sand, Mr. Merriwell. Any odder young fell wo'd got scat an' let me gone w'en der train was right onter us. You didn't. I ain't goin' ter fergit that no more'n I'm goin' ter fergit ther blokes w'at tied me ter ther track. Some time I'm goin' ter know why they done that, an' I'm goin' ter have a settlement wid 'em."

"I don't blame you!" exclaimed Merriwell. "I fancy I should feel like settling with the whelps."

"Oh, Messrs. Joyce an' Jones will hear o' Baldy Briggs ag'in, an' that may be sooner than they expect'. I'll make them mugs sorry they ever tried any such game onter me, you bet yer! That ain't w'at I was

comin' at. As I said, I ain't got money, an' so I can't pay yer, but——"

"Let it drop. You are thankful, and that is enough to satisfy me, Mr. Briggs."

"Mr. Briggs!" gasped the tramp. "Well, that's ther first time I've bin called that in so long I've fer-got ther time! Mr. Briggs! Don't do it ag'in, pal, fer I don't know who ye're speakin' ter!

"If I ain't got money, I may be able ter give yer a lift some time. Ther country is full o' hobos. Take this token. It might help yer wid der gang if yer gits inter trouble."

He thrust a small round ball into the lad's hand, quickly adding:

"Keep it, pal; don't t'row it erway, fer yer don't know w'en it'll come handy. If yer should be held up by hobos, all yer got ter do is ter show that, an' they'll let yer go widout funder trouble."

"Well, I am sure I am much obliged," said Merriwell, quietly. "I will keep it as a memento of this occasion, at least."

"That's right," said Briggs, "an' keep it wid yer w'en yer travels. Now, young gents, I won't bodder

yer longer. You has bisuckles, an' I has me feet. You'll travel by der road, an' I'll hoof it along ther ties. Good-by."

He grasped Frank's hand, gave it a warm pressure, and then, without further words, turned and hurried away along the railroad, soon disappearing in the darkness.

CHAPTER III.

ATTACKED BY RUFFIANS.

TWO days later Frank Merriwell was scorching along a particularly fine piece of road in Southern Illinois. He was far in advance of his companions, who had not chosen to attempt to follow him when he made the burst of speed.

It was a fine morning, and the sun was shining brightly. The country through which the boys were passing was beautiful and attractive in many ways.

Sometimes there were hills, or swells, and there were picturesque groves, with houses set in the shelter of the trees, while fields of corn and grain could be seen in every direction.

Some of these cornfields were marvels to the boys, for the corn stretched away in a vast green forest to the crest of some distant swell, making it seem that corn grew like grass there.

But a close examination showed the evidences of

careful cultivation, and the rows stretched away as straight as such long lines could be drawn.

Men were at work in the fields, and, occasionally, women were seen working side by side with the men. They usually paused to stare at the boys who flashed past on their shining wheels.

"Surely this is a fine farming country," thought Frank; "and the roads are made for cycling—when they are not wet. A fellow's wheel seems almost to run alone here."

The fresh air was like wine in his head, and it seemed quite impossible for him to use the energy at the pedals which he desired to put forth.

He looked back and laughed, for, far away, just coming over the crest of a swell, were his friends, the nickel work on their wheels glittering in the sunshine.

"It is sport to run away from them," cried Frank. "Jack or Harry might give me a hot race, but they are not inclined to try it. Jack says it uses up his energy to spurt in such a manner, and he generally needs it all before the day's run is over. Well, I have to work off a certain amount of superfluous energy in order to settle down to a steady jog for the day."

He was overflowing with animal spirits, was in the best of health and the pink of condition. That was why he felt so strong and buoyant, and it was why everything his eyes saw about him looked good and beautiful.

"It is a grand old world!" he laughed, as he sped along. "The fellow who kicks about this world is a chump. He should be kicked off of it."

Ahead lay a small grove, through which the road ran. As he entered the grove, he saw two rough-looking men standing in the road ahead. They were watching him approach, and seemed to be waiting for him.

"I don't like the looks of those fellows," thought the boy. "They seem like tramps, and one of them has a short club in his hand. I'll keep up steam till I pass them."

As he approached, one of the men, a fellow with a short red beard, stepped into the middle of the road and held up his hand.

"Hold on, young fellow," he cried. "We wants ter talk ter ye."

Frank bent yet a little farther over the handlebars, and sent the wheel flying along.

"Get out of the way!" he shouted. "I can't stop to talk."

"Hold on, I tell ye!" snarled the red-bearded man. "If ye don't—— Dern yer pelt!"

He leaped aside with awkward nimbleness, for he saw that the boy had no thought of stopping, and barely was he in time to avoid being run down.

With a cry of rage, the man lifted the heavy cudgel in his hand and sent it flying after the boy.

It struck Frank between the shoulders and sent him pitching forward from the bicycle to the ground.

"Hang ye!" howled the big man, as he leaped forward. "Try ter run me down, will yer!"

He pounced upon the boy like a beast of prey, pinning Frank to the ground. His yellow teeth showed through his coarse mustache, and there was an ugly glare in his eyes.

The other man came running up, laughing as if it were a great joke.

"Well, yer done that slick, Pink," he cried, in a

complimentary manner. "They don't run away from you none when ye tells 'em ter stop."

"Not much," grated the big man. "When they tries ter monkey with me, they gits hurt—that's w'at!"

"Well, I don't t'ink yer needs ter hold that kid down, fer ther fall clean knocked ther wind outer him."

"Eh? Guess ye're right, Bob. He ain't cuttin' up none to make us nervous. Hope I didn't break his back wid ther club."

"And I hope he didn't break his neck w'en he fell."

"That wouldn't be so bad, for we could leave him here, an' it would seem that he'd got a dump off his wheel, an' that hed fixed him."

"But, jest as hard, I don't keer ter be in no more kill-in's. That job w'at we did ther odder night was enough fer me."

"Ye're soft, Bob, that's what's ther matter wid yer. We got a good bit o' stuff fer doin' that job."

"We ain't got all o' it yit."

"But we will w'en we gits ter der fine gent w'at hired us, an' that won't be ther end o' it. We'll con-tinner ter pull his leg at intervals jest as long as we

wants ter. He won't darst ter refuse ter cough w'en we says cough. In der meantime, however, we has ter hustle for ourselves, an' I'm tired o' bein' kicked off railroad trains. W'en I sees dis young gent on dis bisuckle, I kinder made up my mind that ridin' a wheel was better'n walkin', an' so I decides ter borry his bisuckle. That's why I took ther trouble ter stop ther cove."

At this moment, from far away, came the sound of a clear voice singing some sort of bicycle song.

The two ruffians looked at each other in alarm, and then the big man cried:

"Gimme a han' here, Bob! Some fool is comin'! We've gotter git dis feller inter der bresh! Lively now!"

They caught up the boy, and, with Frank in his arms, the big fellow ran in a lumbering manner into the bushes. The other man lifted the bicycle, and hurried after his companion.

Barely had they disappeared into the thick bushes when Jack Diamond came spinning along the road.

The men had dropped Frank to the ground, and the big ruffian was crouching astride the lad's body,

peering through the bushes. The other fellow hid himself behind the butt of a tree.

Merriwell was dimly conscious of what was taking place. He knew that his friends were passing, and he sought to lift himself and call to them.

Instantly the heavy hands of the big man closed on the neck of the unfortunate lad, and Frank was pressed back to the ground, while a hoarse voice hissed in his ear:

"Don't yer try ter cheep, young feller! It won't be good fer yer if ye do! Keep yer face closed!"

The pressure on Frank's throat would have prevented his making an outcry, had he desired, and it is doubtful if he could have made his friends hear him had those hands been removed.

One by one the boys rode past till all four had gone speeding through the woods, and the two ruffians drew a deep breath of relief.

"Well, we was dead lucky ter hear them afore they was right onter us, pal," said the big man.

"I dunno," chuckled the other. "Them was mighty fine bisuckles w'at the youngsters was ridin' of."

"Yep; but there was too many of the kids."

"All ther same dey was kids, an' ther two o' us could scared ther life outer 'em."

"In your mind," came faintly from Frank Merriwell.

"W'at?" shouted the big man. "Why, this young gent is gittin' real chipper. If he gits too spry, I'll jes' t'ump him on ther head wid somet'ing hard, an' dat will fix him."

The boy heard these words, and understood. He had been robbed of his strength by the shock of the fall, and he realized that he could not fight against such odds, which led him to simulate a state of utter helplessness.

All the while, however, Frank was taking in every word uttered by his captors, and he was studying their appearance through his half-closed eyelids.

"I'll know them when I meet them again," he thought.

The men went through Frank's pockets and took all the money and valuables they could find; but there were two secret pockets under the lad's arms which they did not discover. Had they found these pockets,

Frank might have attempted to make a fight for it, for each pocket carried a certain number of bank notes of large denomination.

"I rudder t'ink yer have hurt der young gent pritty hard, Pink," said Bob. "He don't seem ter have much life in him."

"He'll come roun' all right w'en we're gone," declared the big man. "I t'ought he was goin' ter be all right too quick, so I'd hev ter give him anodder t'ump, an' it was a good t'ing he hed sense enough ter keep still till we was t'rough wid him."

Then, having relieved the boy of all his money and valuables, as they supposed, the tramps—for tramps they were—arose, took the bicycle between them, and departed through the woods, leaving Frank where they had dropped him.

CHAPTER IV.

THE TRAMP'S CAMP.

The boy lifted his head and watched the ruffians depart with his wheel.

"Well, this is a jolly go!" he muttered, ruefully. "The fall from that bicycle knocked the breath and strength out of me. This is the result. But don't think for a moment that I propose to lose my wheel in such a manner."

As soon as the men were far enough away, he arose to his feet, although it cost him an effort, and began to follow them, exercising the greatest caution.

Frank had studied the ways of Western hunters and Indian trailers, and had acquired in an astonishing manner the ability to slip silently through a piece of timber, taking advantage of every available cover to protect him from the eyes of his enemies, in case they should turn and look back.

"I wonder where those fine fellows are taking my wheel?" he speculated, as he crept along. "They are

striking directly away from the road. Well, I'll have to find out."

Beyond the wood was a strip of corn, and through this the men made their way to another piece of timber.

Frank followed as closely as possible.

For no more than a few seconds at a time were the men out of the boy's sight. At last, he saw them approach a spot where a small fire smoldered in the center of a thick grove.

Seated and lying about the fire were several men, and their ragged clothes, unkempt beards and general air of disregard as to their personal appearance proclaimed them to be tramps.

As the two ruffians approached they whistled in a peculiar manner. This whistle was answered by one of the men near the fire.

As Bob and Pink came up, bearing the bicycle between them, some of the tramps who were not asleep stared at the wheel with curiosity, and one fellow stopped gnawing at a chicken bone long enough to ask:

"Where did ye purchase that article, pals?"

"Oh, we traded wid a gent w'at was out takin' his

mornin' constertooshernal on it," grinned Bob. "He didn't seem to care for it much, an' we got it at a bargain."

A man who was smoking a black pipe removed the stem from his mouth long enough to observe:

"It's plain ye've got stuck with an inferior grade of wheel. That make is no good. You'd better ketch ther feller, an' see if he won't take it back."

"What d'yer want of it anyhow?" asked a third man, who was stretched on his back, with his head resting on a small log, which served as a pillow. "It won't go without pushin', an' that's too much work."

"It's better than walkin'," said Bob, good-naturedly.

"Walkin'!" contemptuously cried the man with his head on the log. "Who walks? When I go any distance, I have me special car, as you all know. For shorter trips, why, I call ther coachman and have me rig brought round. What is walkin', anyhow?"

"Well, if ther thing runs too hard, why, we kin sell it," said Pink.

"In yer mind!" derisively cried the man with the pipe. "Who'd pay yer anyt'ing fer it? If you was

to offer it for sale, ye'd be nabbed by an officer, an' locked up fer stealin'."

"Well, then," laughed Bob, "we'll t'row it in der river w'en we gits tired o' ther blooming t'ing."

"Ye may git inter trouble by havin' it at all," said the man with the chicken bone. "What you want to bother with that sort of thing for is more than I can understand."

Very little curiosity was displayed as to the manner in which the bicycle came into the possession of the two ruffians. It was plain that the others believed they had stolen it.

With their hats over their faces, two rough-looking fellows slept on, regardless of the arrival of Bob and Pink and the conversation that was taking place.

The new arrivals looked around, and then, leaning the bicycle against a tree, threw themselves on the ground.

"That's right," said the man with the pipe; "make yerselves to home at the Hotel de Bum. I believe ye registered last night. Which way are you gentlemen from?"

"The South," answered Pink, quickly, winking at Bob, who grinned and remained silent.

"You're gittin' up late," commented the smoker. "What part of ther South did ye winter in? I was down in Floridy a part of the winter, takin' in St. Augustine, Lake Worth, Palm Beach, an' all ther fashionable places. I spent a very pleasant winter meetin' my sassiety friends frum the North down that way."

"I don't care much fer Floridy," declared Bob, with his usual chuckle. "St. Augustine ain't so bad, an' I allus stops at ther Ponce De Leon w'en I'm there; but funder south ther feed gits so bad it makes me tired. Then there's fleas down that way. Fleas don't bodder some folks, but they are very disagreeable fer me. I was down in New Orleans this winter. Great place that."

"It's all right at Mardi Gras," said the man with the pipe, loftily; "but it's dead slow at other times. Too many niggers down there, an' too poor cooks. Then a feller gits malary down that way if he don't take exercise, an' exercise is work. Chills an' fever is sure to tackle us Northerners if we hang around New Orleans too long."

"Whiskey is good for that," observed the man by the log.

"Yep," nodded the smoker. "I met Walker, an old friend of mine, at Jacksonville this winter. He had 'em, an' ther way he was rattlin' his bones made me think he'd struck old St. Vitus. "Hello, Walk,' says I. 'What's ther matter with yer?' 'Nuthin's ther matter with me, Bill,' says he, just this way. 'I'm shakin' fer ther drinks, that's all,' says he. An' neither of us had ther price in our clothes ter git 'em," concluded the tramp, with a sigh.

This made Bob think of a funny story, and he told it. Then the man who had been gnawing at the chicken-bone flung it into the bushes, wiped his mouth with the back of his hand, begged a chew of tobacco from the smoker, and urged Pink to sing a song.

Pink didn't seem to care to sing, saying that he did not feel like it, but he consented at last, and these are the words of the song he sang, his voice being a tenor of good range, although it was not clear, by any means:

Oh! jolly and free is the life of the tramp,
As he roams over valley and hill;
The sun is his fire, and the moon is his lamp,
And 'tis nature that settles the bill.

The singing had awakened the sleepers, and they grunted their lazy appreciation when the song was finished.

"There's nuttin' like it," nodded one. "I'd rudder be a tramp than a millionaire. If I was a millionaire, I'd be worried sick takin' care of my wealth, an' then just think of ther work I'd have ter do cuttin' coupons off government bonds! Them millionaires lead a dog's life. They'd oughter give away their money, an' turn tramps, so they'd enjoy life."

"If you hears about any o' them as contemplates doin' anything o' ther kind, jest let me know," grinned Bob. "I'll tackle him for a whack at his dust. Mebbe outer sympathy fer ther poor devil, I'll change places wid him."

Near at hand Frank Merriwell was watching this singular scene, and listening to the conversation. He had heard the song, and the manner in which it was rendered convinced him that Pink had not always been a tramp, for his language and his pronunciation were good when he sang, for all that he used such a decidedly illiterate dialect in conversation.

Frank's eyes gleamed as they rested on his wheel,

which he was determined to recover. His strength had returned, and with it a feeling of anger and desperate resolve.

He slipped his fingers into a secret pocket, and felt the tiny ball which had been given him by the man he had rescued from the railroad track.

"The tramp's token," he thought. "I'll try and see if it will do all the fellow claimed. If not, I'll make a break to get away with the wheel somehow."

Then he stepped from his place of concealment, and boldly walked into the tramps' camp.

CHAPTER V.

POWER OF THE SPOTTED BALL.

The tramps looked up in amazement as the boy coolly walked into the camp. Bob and Pink uttered exclamations of astonishment and anger, and leaped to their feet.

"How do you do, gentlemen?" said Frank, smiling serenely. "I thought I'd come round and call for my wheel and other things. Don't disturb yourselves, I beg of you."

This nonchalance seemed to take the men aback, and they stood staring stupidly at the boy.

"Eh?" said the man with the pipe, which he poised in the air. "Who be you?"

"I am the owner of this bicycle, sir."

"Derned if he ain't follered us!" growled Pink, fiercely.

Bob nodded.

"That's w'at he has, pal; but he'd better kept away."

By this time all the tramps were on their feet, and

they were regarding the boy in a manner that was anything but reassuring. They were ugly-appearing fellows, and the faces of the most of them told that they would not hesitate at any sort of crime.

Still, if Frank felt at all alarmed, he easily concealed his feelings, seeming utterly unmoved by their threatening manner. He saw they were edging about to surround him, and he moved close to the bicycle.

The man with the pipe snarled at Bob and Pink, telling them they were fine chaps to get the gang into that sort of a scrape. To this the ruffians made no answer, but their manner showed they were angered and aroused.

The boy caught enough of the conversation that was going on around him to realize that he was in danger, as the tramps believed he intended to make trouble for them.

"I trust the gentlemen who borrowed my wheel have used it as much as they desire," said the boy, "for I am now in need of it myself."

"Jump him, Bob!" grated Pink. "We'll have ter settle ther chap this time for good an' all."

Frank saw they were on the point of making a rush for him.

"Stand back!" he suddenly cried, in a commanding manner, making a spring, and placing his back against a tree. "Don't try to touch me!"

Bob laughed, but it was not a mirthful sound.

"Ready, pals!" cried Pink. "We'll go at him all together."

Then Frank suddenly flung up one hand, holding something between the forefinger and thumb. That something was a small black ball, covered with reddish spots and queer heiroglyphics drawn in white lines.

"Stand back!" he cried again. "Look at this! Now—now touch me, if you dare!"

The rough men stared at the peculiar token, and the boy saw a change come over them. They paused in their tracks, and then they suddenly grew very respectful.

"It is ther spotted ball!" exclaimed the man with the pipe. "That lets him out all right, all right."

Pink cursed savagely beneath his breath, and Bob forgot to laugh.

"Where did ye git it, young feller?" asked one of the tramps.

"That is nothing to you," returned Frank, boldly, seeing that the queer little ball had been recognized as a token by the men. "I have it, and that is quite enough."

"No!" snarled Pink; "it ain't enough! You must have stole it. Give it up!"

He rushed forward, and tried to snatch the ball from Frank's hand.

Then it was that, with a swinging blow, into which the young athlete put all his strength, Merriwell caught the ruffian a blow on the chin, lifting him off his feet and hurling him backward.

Pink struck on his head and shoulders, the wind going out of his body with a great puff, and lay stretched on the ground, without offering to get up.

It was a genuine prize-fighter's blow, and the tramps gasped with unspeakable amazement when they saw the big ruffian hurled through the air in such a manner.

Merriwell was young in years, but, youth though he was, it immediately became plain that he was not a

harmless lad with whom to fool. He could strike a terrible blow, as he had readily demonstrated.

"It served him right," said the man with the pipe, giving the fallen tramp a kick. "He had no business ter try ter snatch ther spotted ball."

With this the other tramps agreed, with the exception of Bob, who hastened to lift his friend's head, saying:

"Git up, Pink! Be yer hurted much?"

Pink opened his eyes and stared around in a blank manner.

"Hurted!" he mumbled, as if his tongue were benumbed. "I feels like I had been blowed up by dynermite! W'at did he strike me wid?"

"His fist."

"Well, w'at did he have hid in his fist?"

"Nuttin'."

"Now, don't go fer ter tell me that! No youngster like him could knock me silly wid one belt o' his bare fist. He must uf hed knuckles on."

It was quite impossible to convince Pink that he had not been struck with anything heavier than a boy's fist.

At the same time, he did not seem to care about getting within reach of Merriwell's hand again.

The appearance of the spotted ball and the boy's readiness to defend himself caused the tramps to regard the visitor with the greatest respect.

The man with the pipe took off his wretched old hat, and bowed with exaggerated politeness, as he said:

"Welcome, partner—welcome to ther Hotel de Bum. If yer care ter stay, ye shall have ther best room on ther ground floor, with all ther modern conveniences that ther house affords."

"Thank you," laughed Frank, in an easy manner. "I don't think I'll stop, as I happen to be in a hurry; but, if you do not mind, I'll take my valuables, which happen to be in the possession of the clerk there."

He pointed at Pink, who was standing aloof, feeling of his chin in a doubtful way, as if he feared his jaw had been broken.

"Mr. Jones," said the man with the pipe, "will you hand over the young gent's valuables? An' you, Mr. Joyce, if you have any of them, yer want ter cough 'em up."

This was said in a manner that made it a command. The two tramps who had assaulted and robbed Frank hesitated and muttered; as if they were inclined to refuse to obey.

The man with the pipe made a lazy sort of signal, and the other tramps began to gather around Bob and Pink, their manner showing they were ready to do as they should be directed.

The cornered ruffians saw things had turned against them, and they reluctantly began to disgorge. Everything they gave up was immediately handed over to the owner, and he was politely asked to make sure nothing had been retained.

Frank would have been well satisfied to recover his wheel, and he was far better satisfied to regain possession of everything that had been taken from him.

"Well, I didn't do such a bad turn for myself when I saved the tramp from being killed by the railroad train," was his mental decision.

When everything had been returned to the boy, the leader of the tramps politely expressed his regret if he had been put to any trouble, and hoped that he would not see fit to cause any unpleasantness by re-

porting the affair to the authorities. More than that, he was informed that he need not fear being molested by tramps if he retained the spotted ball and promptly showed it on the proper occasions.

Frank was rather doubtful of the sincerity of the tramps up to the moment when he was permitted to take his wheel and leave the grove.

"This was a queer adventure, to say the least," he muttered, as he trundled the bicycle through the field of corn. "I wouldn't mind it much but for the fact that I am sore between the shoulders, where that ruffian's club struck me when I was knocked from the wheel, and the shock of falling was rather severe."

He reached the road, mounted his wheel and rode away.

As he rode along he thought over his late adventure. He felt that he would remember the two men who had attacked him, and he was confident he had heard their names before. Joyce and Jones. He repeated the names over and over, and then, of a sudden, he remembered.

The tramp who had been tied to the track had said that the names of the men who tied him there were

Joyce and Jones. He had said that Joyce was a jolly chap who told funny stories, and Jones was a beautiful singer. As Frank was peering into the tramps' camp, he had heard Joyce tell one of his funny stories, and Jones had been induced to sing a song.

"They are the very ruffians!" he cried. "There isn't a doubt of it! They must have traveled by rail to get here ahead of me, but here they are. If Briggs were here, I'd spend time enough to put him after them."

But Briggs was not there, and he rode on, little thinking he would ever see Joyce and Jones again.

But he had not seen them for the last time.

When Frank regained the highway, he hastened to mount and pedal after his friends, and he found them returning to look for him.

"Well, hay I be banged—I mean may I be hanged!" cried Rattleton. "I'd like to know how we missed you!"

Frank laughed, and then, as the boys turned about and rode along with him, he told them of his recent adventure.

Diamond was highly indignant, and wished to have

the tramps punished, but Merriwell declared they could not afford to waste time to bother with the ruffians.

"How in the world did you get out of the scrape, Merry?" asked Jack.

"By aid of the tramp's token—the spotted ball."

"How did that aid you?"

"I showed it, and that was all that was necessary. I was treated with the greatest consideration immediately."

"Well, how do you explain that?" asked Harry.

"The only explanation I can give is that there must be some sort of secret order or organization among the tramps, and that whoever carries one of those spotted balls is guaranteed from injury by any of the order. I have heard of such an organization."

"Well, if dat am a fac'," cried Toots, "dis chile am gwine teh make spotted balls by de cord. Dey am mighty goot things teh have 'roun' yeh close, chilluns."

CHAPTER VI.

THE RUNAWAY.

A day later Frank and his friends were riding toward a town not more than twelve miles from St. Louis.

The boys were in the best of spirits, and they joked and laughed as they pedaled along.

Frank was rather lame between his shoulders, but he did not mind that, and his jolly sallies kept the others laughing.

Along the road came a carriage, drawn by two handsome horses. In the carriage sat a man and a little girl. The girl was very pretty, but there was a haughty, overbearing air about the man, who was portly and flashily dressed.

The horses were high-spirited, and the road not very wide at the point where the bicyclists and the carriage must meet and pass.

"Get out of the road there!" cried the man, in an arrogant manner, scowling at the boys.

And then, as Bruce Browning turned out somewhat slowly, the man reined the horses toward him, and Bruce escaped with some difficulty by leaping from his wheel and running out by the roadside. One of the carriage wheels grazed the tire of the rear wheel of Browning's bicycle.

"Well, confound that big hog!" angrily exploded Bruce, as he turned and started after the team. "Why, he tried to run over me! I'd like to punch his fat head!"

"And I wouldn't mind helping you do it," said Frank, who was indignant at the action of the unknown man.

"Some persons seem to get an idea that a bicycle rider doesn't have any rights at all," said Harry. "They crowd him every fance they chind—no, every chance they find."

Bruce brought his wheel back to the road, and examined it to make sure it had sustained no damage. It was all right, and he mounted, after repeatedly expressing a desire to follow the man and "have an argument" with him.

The boys were taking their time, and, before they

entered the village, they heard horses' hoofs and wheels behind them. Then, once more came the shout for them to get out of the road.

Looking back, they saw the same span approaching, driven by the same stout man, to whose arm the little girl was clinging.

The hot blood flushed Jack Diamond's face, and the spirit of the young Virginian was aroused.

"If you run over me, it will cost you something!" he flung back.

An angry retort leaped from the man's lips. He said something about "insolence," and then reined the horses toward Jack, although the road was wide enough at that point for him to pass with ease.

Jack's hand went into his pocket and came out in a twinkling. In his grasp was a big torpedo, one of a number that he carried for the purpose of scaring off dogs that might become troublesome. His hand was lifted, and he flung the torpedo directly beneath the feet of the horses.

There was a flash of fire, a sharp report, snorts of alarm, a scream of terror from the child and an exclamation of alarm and anger from the man. Then

the frightened horses leaped away, nearly upsetting the carriage. In another moment they were running madly down the road, dragging the rocking carriage along at alarming speed.

Frank Merriwell instantly saw that the man had lost control of the spirited animals. The scream of terror from the pretty child and the look of fear on her innocent face appealed to him, and away he darted in hot pursuit of the runaways.

The child continued to shriek, while the man made desperate efforts to check the frightened horses, but they seemed to run faster and faster with each passing moment.

The other lads started in pursuit, but they were not so quick in getting away, and Frank had a long lead.

The hoofs of the horses tore up the dirt, and Merriwell's nostrils and eyes were filled with dust. This did not retard him in the least, for, with firm-set mouth and resolute face, he bent over the handlebars and made the wheel fly over the road.

Frank was determined to overtake the runaways and do what he could to check the frightened animals. If harm came to the little girl Frank felt that Jack

would be to blame, and he knew the young Virginian would never forgive himself for throwing that torpedo.

Fortunately the road was clear, and the horses dashed straight ahead after that first wild swerve. But they added to each other's terror by their companionship, and it seemed that a hand of iron could not check them.

Frank made wonderful speed, and the outskirts of the village were reached when the boy ran the forward wheel of his bicycle under the back of the carriage.

Then he nerved himself for an almost superhuman effort, knowing that the slightest mistake would hurl him into the dust of the road.

Like a flash, he lifted himself on his machine and leaped!

It was a most amazing spring, and it carried the boy from the wheel into the back of the carriage, where he clung.

A moment later Frank went over the child's head and clutched the reins, snatching them from the nerveless hands of the frightened man.

Along the main street of the village galloped the horses, and the villagers saw a spectacle that filled them with excitement and astonishment.

Frank knew how to handle those horses, and he realized that they could not be subdued in a moment. He gathered in the reins, winding them about his hands, and then he brought all his superb young strength into play.

The frightened animals had grasped the bits with their teeth, and skill as well as strength was required to get control of them.

Frank talked to them soothingly, his voice like liquid music. He endeavored to show the creatures that he was their master, and, at the same time, he did everything to allay their fears. He did not yank them, and yet he checked their speed with strong surges.

Fortunately they had not begun kicking, and the boy labored to check them without leading them to use their heels, as that was what he feared most.

The man had been amazed by the appearance of the boy, as he had not dreamed that one of the bicyclists could overtake the carriage and get into it. It seemed

a marvel that Frank Merriwell should come vaulting over the head of the child and clutch the reins.

Luckily the little girl became too frightened to scream, and so her shrill voice ceased to add to the terror of the horses.

Frank held the animals to the straight street, praying that the way might remain clear before them.

An old farmer was slow about getting his team and himself out of the road, and a collision was averted by scarcely more than a hair's breadth.

Jack Diamond, riding like the wind, flashed along beside the carriage, and cried:

"Is there anything I can do, Merry?"

"Keep away!"

That was all the answer Frank made, but Jack understood and obeyed.

Through the village lunged the runaways, but the boy was beginning to get them under control.

"Whoa, my beauties," sounded his clear, musical voice. "Steady, boys! There is nothing to be afraid of, ponies. Whoa, now—whoa, boys! You are kicking up a dust, but it's time to calm down. Easy, there—easy, now. So—that's better. Whoa, who-o-oa!"

It is impossible to describe the soothing sweetness of his voice. The horses heard, and they began to show less terror. Little by little they calmed down, reassured and quieted by the lad's voice, rather than conquered by his strength.

And the big man in the carriage, the owner of those horses, clung to the seat and the little girl, filled with wonder by what had occurred and what was taking place.

And so, in a short time, Frank brought them to a walk, finally stopping them entirely. Then he placed the reins in the hands of the big man, and, with a light laugh, as if the incident had been most enjoyable, leaped to the ground, where he removed his cap and bowed to the little girl, who was sobbing and clinging to the man.

"There is nothing to be afraid of now, dear Little Blue Eyes," he said. "The danger is all over, and the horses will not run away again."

There was a gurgle in the fat throat of the man, and he glared at the boy. His face, which had been bloodless and lead-colored, began to flush and grow purple, in an angry, unhealthy manner.

"A nice piece of business, this!" he grated, his rage showing in his eyes. "They would not have run away in the first place but for you and your gang of hoodlums."

Now Frank did not like the man's manner, his tone, or his words. The laughing look fled from his face, and his lips closed over his white teeth. For a moment he looked the big man straight in the eyes, and then he coldly said:

"We are not hoodlums, sir, and you are the one who is to blame for this entire affair, as you very well know."

"What's that?" huskily cried the man. "Why, you insolent young scoundrel! do you dare—— It's too much!"

Words seemed to fail him, and he stopped, gurgling and choking.

"Yes, I dare," said the boy from Yale, and it was plain that he was not in the least awed by the big man. "I dare tell you that you are one of those offensive human beings who seem to think they own the earth. You will impose on any one who has not the nerve or the strength to resent it, and you made two outrageous

attempts to run over members of my party a short time ago; but this time you stacked up against the wrong people, for we do not propose to be run over by the President of the United States, or the Czar of Russia—much less by such a person as you. We are boys, it is true, but we can look out for ourselves.”

By this time Jack Diamond was on hand, and the other boys were approaching. Jack was angry.

“It would have served you right if your horses had thrown you out and broken your neck!” burst from the hot-blooded Virginian.

“And but for this little girl, whose pretty face filled me with a desire to save her from harm, I should have left you to take care of your own runaway horses,” declared Frank.

“I could have taken care of them all right,” rasped the big man, in great fury. “It would have been better if you had minded your own business and let me alone.”

“Why, you thick-headed old chump!” exploded Harry Rattleton, who had come up in time to hear the man’s final words, “if Merry had let you alone, those horses would have smashed the carriage and thrown

out yourself and the little girl. It's four to one that Merry saved your life, flasted bool—I mean blasted fool—that you don't know it!"

That was more than the man could endure, and he uttered words that would not look well in print.

"You insolent young whelps you do not know who I am!" he shouted.

"And we don't care a rap, don't you know," drawled Bruce Browning, who had arrived.

"Dat's right," nodded Toots. "Yo' ain't de only one, ma-an—dere am odders. Yo' ain't de only peanut in shop—yo' kin be roasted."

"My name is Lyman Lawrence, and I am a justice of the peace," declared the big man. "If you do not get out of this town in short order, I'll have you all arrested and fined."

"Dat is, if yo' kin find us," grinned the colored boy.

"Be quiet, Toots," ordered Frank. "For what would you fine us, sir?"

"For carrying concealed weapons."

"But we do not carry concealed weapons."

"I know better! That chap there fired a pistol and scared my horses."

"That's where you are mistaken," contradicted Jack. "I simply threw a torpedo, which I carry for the purpose of frightening away ugly dogs."

"Well, you frightened my horses, anyway," grumbled the man, "and I'll have you all arrested if you dare show your heads back in the village. That settles it."

Then, finding a wide place in the road, he turned his team about, and drove back toward the village.

CHAPTER VII.

THE TRAMPS APPEAR AGAIN.

"Well, he is a nice sort of old duffer—nit!" exclaimed Rattleton, in supreme disgust, as the boys watched the departing carriage.

"He's a gin'wine gemmans—I don' think!" observed Toots, in ludicrous scorn.

"It would do him good to have his head punched," drawled Browning, in his lazy way; "and it would do me good to punch it."

"Such creatures make me sick!" exclaimed Diamond, hotly.

Frank's face relaxed, and he smiled, as if the whole thing were a most amusing joke, which he alone appreciated.

"It's no use to be hot over it," he said. "The world is made up of all sorts and conditions of men. We are sure to run up against unpleasant persons on our sojourn through life."

"Well, you have a way of looking at such things

that I cannot understand," declared Jack. "I never know whether you are going to laugh over anything as a joke, or let yourself out and knock the stuffing out of somebody. I have known you for some time, Merry, but I am free to confess that I do not comprehend you yet. I don't believe you are built like other fellows."

"Why should we all be built after the same pattern?" was the laughing question. "It takes all kinds of men to make up a world, and variety among human beings is as interesting as variety in other things."

"Dat am a fac'," nodded Toots, with a sage expression.

"I believe in every person being himself," Frank went on. "If there is anything on earth that makes me weary it is the chap who tries to imitate some other fellow. Such a chap lacks originality, lacks distinctiveness, lacks force, and is pretty sure to be an imitator in everything he does all his life. You may be sure he'll never startle the world by doing anything novel or original."

"Well, we are not thinking about startling the world

just now," said Bruce. "What we are thinking about is the way that old chap has treated us."

"I do not propose to think about that any more," said Frank. "It is all over now, and it's not likely we'll have any further dealings with him."

"I don't know about that," Jack declared. "Your wheel is beside the road beyond this town, where I told Toots to put it, and we must go back through the town, in order to recover it."

"That is all right."

"It's all right; but you will remember that Mr. Lyman Lawrence has threatened to have us arrested if we dare show ourselves in the place."

"And it struck me that Mr. Lawrence was putting up a big bluff when he made that remark."

"You do not believe he will make good his threat?"

"No."

"I don't know about that," Rattleton hastily put in. "He is a vindictive old wretch, and it might be just like him to do so."

"I am willing to take chances on it," said Frank.

"An' dis chile am wid yo'," declared Toots, swaggingly.

"Old Lawrence seemed to think that he tuns the rown—I mean runs the town," hastily said Rattleton.

"And, as police justice, he may be able to make it unpleasant for us there," said Bruce.

"All this makes me feel all the more like going back to see what he will do," smiled Frank.

"An' it jes' meks me feel dat way, too," grinned Toots, who was determined to stand in with Frank.

"I think we'd better go back boldly," said Jack. "It will not be good policy to let the man think he has intimidated us in the least."

So the boys decided to return to the town. Jack had a step on his bicycle, and on this step Frank stood with one foot, while the Virginian worked the pedals. In that manner they rode back to town, passed through, and found the bicycle where it had been left beside the road.

"Now I feel like myself again," cried Frank, when he was mounted on his wheel. "This affair has been a little diversion, the same as my encounter with tramps."

"We must pass through the town again," said Bruce.

"That is true, and I have a fancy to stop a while in the town."

"Why?"

"Oh, just because I feel like it, that is all. It can't be far from midday, and we might get something to eat there."

"By golly!" cried the colored lad; "dat strikes dis chile jes' where he libs! I's so holler dat I kin feel de notches in mah backbone ebery time I put mah han' on mah stomach."

"You carry around an appetite like an alligator," said Harry.

"Dunno nuffin' 'bout yeh allumgator, but I knows dis ridin' a bisuckle makes me feel lek I could eat ah fried bootleg sometimes. Dis am one of de times."

"And I am aweary and aweary," sighed Bruce. "I am aweary, and I wish I were in bed. I feel like stopping in yonder hamlet and resting these weary bones of mine."

"Beary woness—I mean weary bones!" cried Harry, in derision. "I'd like to know where you keep 'em. I don't believe you have any more bones than a jelly-fish."

"You'd think I had a few bones if I should take a fancy to push my fist up under your ear once," growled the big fellow.

"What do you say about stopping, Jack?" asked Frank.

"I am willing to stop a while and see what Mr. Lawrence will do," said the young Virginian, rather savagely.

"All right; stop it is," cried Frank.

They rode into town, stared at by the citizens who had witnessed the runaway and the pursuit of the bicycle boys. Straight to the hotel they went, followed by a number of curious persons.

At the hotel the boys put up, and ordered dinner for five.

Later, they came out upon the veranda, where they sat about in the shade, Browning smoking cigarettes and half dozing.

Several village loafers had stopped at the hotel, and a number of boys stood about and stared at the handsome uniforms of the young tourists.

Frank sat down beside an old man, to whom he spoke pleasantly, observing:

"You seem to have a rather pretty little village here."

"Ya-as," was the moderate reply, "it's a purty good town. All the fault there is to find with it is that too many rich men live here. Where are you fellers from?"

Frank answered the question, explaining that they were on their way across the continent, which caused the eyes of the old man to open with wonder and incredulity. The other curious townsmen had gathered around, and their faces showed doubt. Some of them grinned at each other knowingly, and the old man, who gave his name as Rufus Sap, said:

"Now, don't try to fool with us. You don't want us to believe you boys are tryin' to ride them bisuckles from New York to San Francisco?"

"Well," laughed Frank, "you may not believe it, but it is quite true, just the same."

"You'll never do it!"

"Why not?"

"Too far," grunted Mr. Sap.

"We have ridden from New York to this place!"

"How is the ridin' on the railroads nowadays?"

whimsically asked the old man. "I ain't rid much for a long time."

"The jamed old blay—I mean the blamed old jay!" muttered Harry, in mingled amusement and anger. "He thinks Frank is stringing him."

"Keep still," ordered Jack. "It is not so very strange that some old men who do not know much about bicycles should think such a feat impossible."

Frank was amused.

"We have not found it necessary to ride on the railroads since leaving New York," he declared.

"Well, yer must have been an awful long time comin'," said Mr. Sap. "S'pose you started as soon as the snow was off the ground?"

"Well, not quite so soon as that," smiled Frank.

"You'll be lucky if you ever git to 'Frisco. You can't ride over the Rocky Mount'ins, and I'll bet a good fat hog you don't get out to 'Frisco before the first of next year."

"Did you observe that I was in the carriage of the man whose horses ran away and took him through town a short time ago?"

"Yes, I saw ye."

"And did you see my friends following at a speed equal to that of the runaway horses?"

"They was goin' at a great stick," confessed the old settler; "but they couldn't keep that up long," he added, as if that settled the matter.

"Well, let me tell you that I started on my bicycle in pursuit of that team after the horses were running away, overtook it, got into the carriage, and finally stopped the horses."

Mr. Sap fairly gasped for breath.

"Do you want me to b'lieve you could do that?" he rather angrily demanded. "Well, I aint' no fool, if I am an old man, and I won't be imposed on by any young upstart like you! You can tell your fish stories to them that will swaller 'em!"

With that, he got up from his chair, rather stiffly, and, assisted by his cane, hobbled slowly and painfully away.

Frank could not hold back his merry laughter, and the other boys joined him in his mirth. Some of the townsfolk laughed, and some looked angry, as if they thought they were being guyed.

A young man took the chair vacated by Mr. Sap.

"You mustn't mind him," said the young man, waving his hand toward the retreating figure of the old settler. "He can't understand that a bicycle is capable of such speed. He is one of the old-timers, and he is not willing to believe that modern progress is capable of producing things so vastly superior to anything they had in his day."

Frank sized up the young man at a glance, deciding that here was a person who wished to display his up-to-dateness. At the same time, Merriwell believed that he could question the fellow, and so he immediately said:

"I do not mind any old person who is set in his peculiar beliefs and convictions. By the way, I believe the name of the man whose horses ran away is Lyman Lawrence?"

"That is right—Judge Lyman Lawrence, one of the wealthiest men in the State, it is said. That small building over there is his office, and that fine house on the corner down there is his residence."

"He must have some business besides that of police justice?"

"Oh, he is the owner of a valuable mine in Colorado. His mine brings him in an immense income."

"Is he a popular man in town?"

"Well," was the confidential reply, "he is not exactly what you might call popular, but he has influence, and he is feared. Folks around here don't care to get him down on 'em."

"I suppose the child I saw in the carriage with him is his daughter, is it not?"

"Yes, sir—his only child. His wife is an invalid, and"—the young man lowered his voice—"it is said she does not lead the happiest life imaginable with him. She has few friends, and she is seldom seen in his company. I have seen her, and I should say she was handsome when she was a young woman, but she has a very sad face now."

"Does Judge Lawrence live here the year around?"

"Except when he goes to see about his mine."

"Does he go often?"

"Two or three times a year."

"Why doesn't he live out there?"

"I don't know. He does a number of strange things,

as you would discover if you were to know him better."

"I do not care to know him better," said Frank, as he arose. "I thank you for answering my questions. Come on, fellows, let's take a stroll about town."

And then, before the young man could satisfy his curiosity by propounding questions in return, Frank descended the steps, followed by Rattleton, Diamond and Toots.

Browning was seated in a comfortable position, and he yawned.

"Go ahead, if you want to hoof it around. I think too much of my shoes to wear them out that way."

So the boys left the hotel without him. They had drawn on their blue sweaters, with a big "Y" on the breast of each, and they caused the townspeople to stare as they sauntered about.

There was not much of interest about the village to be seen, and they finally found themselves in the vicinity of the railroad station, as a train of freight cars came in from the East.

As the train slackened speed in the vicinity of the station, the door of a car was thrust open, and two

men came flying out, propelled by the boots of some trainmen who were in the car. The men struck the ground and fell sprawling, rolled over, and then got upon their feet, where they stood, fierce language pouring from their lips, while they shook their fists furiously in the air.

Frank Merriwell saw the two men, and started. Then he looked closer, exclaiming: "So help me, I believe I know those fine fellows! I am sure of it! They are Joyce and Jones, the tramps!"

CHAPTER VIII.

A MYSTERY SOLVED.

Frank was astonished by the appearance of the tramps.

"Hanged if it doesn't seem as if they are chasing me around!" he exclaimed. "I'd like to lodge them in the workhouse, or State prison, where they belong."

"Come, fellows," said Merriwell, "let's follow them. I'd like to give them a drubbing for the little trick they played on me."

"We can do it in great shape," said Rattleton, enthusiastically. "I'd like to punch them a few times to pay them for making us ride back to find you."

The tramps looked over their shoulders, and, seeing the boys coming after them, increased their speed, turning down a side street, running amid some sheds, and quickly disappearing from view.

"Well, I scarcely think it is any use to attempt to follow them," said Frank. "We'll go back to the hotel."

A good dinner made the entire party feel better, but none of them felt like hurrying away, for the day was hot and uncomfortable. After a consultation, it was resolved to remain there till the afternoon became cooler.

Frank was restless, and he went out alone, leaving the others to remain around the hotel.

Frank walked down toward the place where he had last seen the two tramps. Something seemed to tell him that the ruffians had not arrived in that place by chance.

There were some sidetracks about the station, and those tracks were well filled with empty cars. In the doorway of one of the cars the boy saw a colored man sitting, and he was talking to a white man, who was standing on the ground. That white man was Pink Jones, the tramp.

For some reason Frank felt a curiosity to hear what the two men were saying, and he slipped up behind the car till he could catch some of their words.

Almost the very first thing the boy could understand made him hold his breath with surprise and interest.

Jones was asking the colored man about Judge Lawrence.

How did it happen that the tramp knew Judge Lawrence? and why should he be seeking information concerning the judge?

Frank hoped to overhear enough to explain this, but he was disappointed, for Jones seemed to have learned all he desired to know, and he slouched away shortly after the boy had obtained a position to hear what was being said.

Frank did not attempt to interfere with the tramp, but let him go, returning leisurely to the hotel.

Less than an hour later, happening to look down the street, he saw the two tramps pause in front of Lawrence's handsome house. Then, as they stood there, Jones pointed out the house and the judge's office to Joyce.

"Hanged if this isn't getting more and more interesting!" muttered Merriwell. "Something is in the wind. I wonder if those fellows contemplate robbing the judge?"

He decided that they were not planning anything of

the sort, for they were much too bold about their movements.

Then Frank took a notion to follow the tramps, and he shadowed them to the house of a woman who kept boarders. From a distance, he saw them call the woman to the door and talk with her some time. They offered her money, and, at last, she admitted them to the house.

It was by making inquiries that the boy found the woman sometimes kept transient boarders.

"They induced her to keep them by paying their money in advance," decided Frank. "She did not like their appearance at first, and did not want to have them in the house, but the sight of the money brought her round."

Later in the day, when the boys expressed their readiness to resume their journey, they were not a little surprised to hear Frank express a determination to remain in that place until the following morning.

"All right," sighed Browning, in a contented way; "that satisfies me. You need not hurry on my account."

Then he straightway sought a room, and, ten minutes after being shown to it, was snoring on the bed.

Immediately after supper, without saying anything to the others, Frank left the hotel.

He hastened to the vicinity of the house where the tramps had sought and found lodging.

Nearly an hour elapsed before any one came out, and then, as the door opened, the light of the hall lamp showed the boy that it was the two tramps.

Frank followed them, and he saw them make their way directly to the little office of Judge Lawrence.

The inside shutters of the little building were closed, and there seemed to be no one within; but one of the tramps knocked on the door in a peculiar manner, and, a moment later, the door was opened.

Then the two men quickly entered the office.

As may be imagined, Frank's curiosity was thoroughly aroused by this time, for he realized that the door had been opened in response to a secret signal, and that meant that the tramps had been expected. Plainly, some person was waiting in that office to see them, and who could that person be, unless it were Judge Lawrence?

"Here is a mystery!" muttered the boy. "If it was Judge Lawrence, why did he admit the tramps? Why is he having dealings with such creatures? I'd give a few dollars to get the real facts of this affair."

He slipped up to the office, climbed the little fence at the corner, and crept noiselessly around behind the building. There, beneath a window, he paused. No light shone from that window, but he distinctly heard the sound of excited voices.

The window was higher than Frank's head, as the little building was set on a high foundation.

"Oh, for something to climb on—something that will bring me up where I can hear!" thought the interested lad.

He searched around and found a board, which he leaned in a slanting position against the building, directly beneath the window. With the aid of this, he lifted himself till his head was on a level with the lower sash.

Once there, Frank discovered how it was that he could hear the men within so plainly. A bit of glass was broken from the corner of one of the window

panes, and that permitted the sounds to reach his ears, although the inner shutters were tightly closed.

Frank heard a man speaking excitedly and angrily, and he instantly recognized the voice as that of Judge Lawrence. The words chained Merriwell's entire attention.

"I tell you that you have bungled this job!" Lawrence was saying, in an excited and angry growl. "You have made a miserable mess of the whole matter."

"That's where ye're away off, jedge," said Pink Jones, his tone showing he was exasperated. "We knows our biz, does Bob an' I, an' we cooked ther duck fer yez all right, all right. Eh, Bob?"

"Yer bet we did," asseverated Bob. "He'll never bodder you no more, jedge, an' we wants our dough."

"That's what we does," from Jones. "Yer promised a hundred apiece if we'd cook his goose, an' gave us fifty each in advance. Now, we wants ther rest of it, an' we means ter have it. Yer can't play funny wid us, jedge."

A fierce exclamation broke from Lawrence's lips.

"I tell you that you are bungling fools!" he snarled. "How did you do the job?"

"Well, we jes' tied ther duck ter ther railroad track, an' let him stay there an' be chopped inter mince-meat by the night express. I don't t'ink he'll ever bodder yez much arter bein' chawed up by ther wheels of an express train."

"Not a great deal," agreed Bob.

"Did you stay and see the express train run over him?"

"W'at was ther use? He was tied fast, an' gagged. We didn't want ter be found round them parts in ther mornin', an' so we hoofed it in this direction."

There was another snarl from Lawrence.

"That was where you made fools of yourselves!" he declared. "I hired you to make sure of the job, as Clinton had located me, and was threatening to become troublesome. You did it in a sloppy way, and it was a fizzle. Here—here is a note I received this very day. I will read it, and then you may examine it yourself."

"**LYMAN LAWRENCE:** Your dastardly scheme to destroy me and thus save yourself from my vengeance failed, and I still live—live to square the account with you. Your murderous hired tools did tie me to a

railroad track and leave me to my fate, but I was saved from death in a marvelous manner. This makes me feel that fate is watching over me till I shall avenge myself on you for the misery you have caused me. By a lie you robbed me of the woman I loved, and then, in fear of me, by a lie you caused me to be thrown into a prison cell, where I remained for years. When I became free, I started to hunt for you. You had vanished, but I located you at last. Foolishly, I warned you of my coming, and you sent your murderers out to put me out of the way. They failed. And now we shall meet face to face very soon. When we do, you shall not escape me. With deepest hatred,

“WALLACE CLINTON.”

“There,” cried Lawrence, hoarsely—“there it is! Look at it—read it! You can see it is no forgery, for how should I know that you tied him to the track, so that I could put it into writing to show you? Besides that, I would give two hundred dollars—yes, five hundred—this minute to know Wallace Clinton were dead! I would not resort to this sort of a ruse to save a paltry hundred dollars.”

There followed some moments of silence, and then Bob was heard to slowly say: “Phil, it begins to look like we had made a slip.”

Pink began to rave, using the most shocking language.

"It warn't our fault!" he cried. "We done our part of it all right. How could the critter have got away?"

"That I do not know," said Lawrence; "but you can see that he did get away, and he is coming here. As soon as possible, I shall start for another part of the country. Now, I am going to give you chaps one more chance to make a pull. To-night I will pay you twenty-five dollars each, providing you agree to do your best to finally dispose of Wallace Clinton."

"That ain't enough," broke in Pink.

"Hold on," sharply commanded Lawrence. "I am not done. When you bring me positive proof that Clinton is dead, I will pay you two hundred dollars each. You can't ask for more. I want you to agree to lose no time in completing the work."

"We'll do it!" cried both tramps together. "You won't have to worry about that. We'll make sure next time, an' ther duck'll be dead when we calls on yer."

Frank put his mouth close to the broken square of

glass, and distinctly cried : "And you will both hang for the job, together with Lyman Lawrence."

Then he dropped down lightly and slipped away into the dense darkness, satisfied that he had created a sensation and filled the hearts of the three villains with terror.

CHAPTER IX.

FRANK'S CLOSE CALL.

Early the following morning the young tourists mounted their wheels and sped away to the westward.

They crossed the Mississippi into St. Louis, but did not spend more time there than was required for Frank to visit the various newspaper offices, at each of which he left the following notice, to be inserted as a paid advertisement:

“WALLACE CLINTON, BEWARE!

“Your enemy, the man who hired tramps to tie you to the railroad track, has again bargained with those ruffians to put you out of the way. They are to make sure of their work next time.

“THE ONE WHO SAVED YOU.”

“There,” muttered the boy, when this was done, “I trust that will reach the eyes of the man it is intended for. I know of no other way of warning him. Besides this, I have written an unsigned warning to Lyman Lawrence, telling him his murderous scheme

is known, and that he had better drop it. That may scare him so he will call his dogs off."

Frank felt that he could do nothing more. He had found how influential Lyman Lawrence really was, and he knew well enough that it would be impossible to make the general public believe such a man could hire tramps to murder a tramp.

None of the boys expected again to see the tramps or Judge Lawrence, with whom they had had such an unpleasant adventure. For two days they pushed onward through Missouri. At last, late one afternoon, they found themselves making a desperate run to reach a certain town before nightfall.

They paused to inquire the shortest route of a man who was calmly smoking a corncob pipe in front of a miserable hut.

"Wa-al," drawled the native, "raound by ther road it is a right smart distance, but the railroad over yon makes it straight. It ain't nigh so fur by ther railroad. Wagon road ain't none too good, either. I reckon it'd been a heap sight better fer ye ef ye'd took ther train back at Sagg's Station, 'stead of tryin' ter ride it on them there things."

He accompanied his concluding words with a look of scorn toward the bicycles.

"Think we can make it before night?" asked Frank.

"Not on them there things, I judge."

The boys thanked him, and rode on.

"It is plain he has a very poor opinion of bicycles," said Jack.

Frank said nothing, but it was plain by the expression on his face that he was thinking. Soon they came to the railroad of which the man had spoken.

Frank stopped, dismounted, and took a look at the track. To his satisfaction, he saw that the cross-ties were buried almost on a level with the roadbed.

"I say, fellows," smiled Merriwell, "I'll wager you that I take the railroad and beat you into town."

"Oh, come off!" yawned Bruce. "You are always trying some such thing as that. Come along with the rest of us. The road is good enough, and you will bump the stuffing out of your wheel riding over the ties."

"I'll take my chances on the wheel, and I'll get in ahead of you."

"The trouble with you is that you have the swelled

head because you have beaten us once or twice by taking some unused road," declared Rattleton. "Go ahead and rail the ride road—I mean ride the railroad! I am sticking to the highway."

"That is what I want you to do," laughed Frank; "and I will beat you into town."

"This time is where you slip up, Merry," asserted Jack Diamond. "We'll beat you into town, for you'll soon get tired of bumping over the rails, and will take to footing it."

"All right, if you think so. I'll try it, anyway."

They found he was determined to make the attempt. Then Toots wanted to accompany him, but Frank would not agree to that, saying he might cut out a pace that would be too hot for the colored boy.

They parted, Frank mounting and riding along the track leading toward a range of hills close at hand, while the others sped along the road.

Frank soon found that the railroad was indeed rough in places. Then he got out and took to riding along the shoulder of the road, close to the ends of the ties. This was better, and he made good speed.

The sun was low in the west when Frank reached

the hills. He was surprised to see that the range rose like a barrier in advance, but still the railroad ran on as straight as a die.

In a short time he came to the black mouth of a tunnel.

"Well, say! this is nice!" he cried, dismounting. "I do not mind riding in the night without a lantern—I prefer it—but this is different. It will be pocket dark in there."

However, there seemed to be no other way, and Frank did not feel like turning back.

"This can't be a long tunnel," he decided; "so here goes."

He mounted and rode on slowly, but the darkness of the tunnel seemed intensified by the change from the outer air. He crept along with the utmost caution, like a blind man, and then, after a little, he dismounted, preferring to trundle his wheel.

He had not gone far before he realized that he would be caught in an awkward place if a train should happen along. Still he would not turn back.

Frank felt like a blind man as he crept through the tunnel. Several times he fancied he heard a train ap-

proaching, but, pausing to listen, his heart in his mouth, he concluded he was deceived.

Finally Frank paused, suddenly stooped, found the rail, and placed his ear close to it. What he heard sent the blood in an icy flood to his heart.

"A train is coming!" he gasped, as he leaped to his feet. "Which way?"

For a moment he stood there like one turned to stone, seeming unable to move. Then he realized that every moment was precious. He had come far in the tunnel, and it seemed that he would stand a better chance by going ahead. Besides, it seemed that the train must be behind him.

Frank steadied his wheel, set the pedals right by touch and made ready to mount.

"Now be cool, old man," he whispered. "It is useless to get frightened."

With deliberation, yet without loss of time, he mounted his wheel. Then he increased his speed steadily and surely, seeming to find his way along in the intense darkness by instinct.

His ears were strained and his senses acute. Should he find the train was in advance, he must turn about,

although there was scarce a chance that he could do so and escape with his life.

Then, with startling suddenness, a roaring sound filled the place, and he knew the train had entered the tunnel!

This knowledge caused the boy to send the wheel spinning along at great speed, taking desperate chances. If he should be thrown, it was almost certain that he would be stunned, and he must remain on the track to be crushed by the train.

The roaring grew more and more distinct, and Frank felt beyond a doubt that it was behind him.

It was a wild race for life through the darkness. Would the boy win? or would he meet a horrible death there in the tunnel?

He strained his eyes for a glimpse of light in advance.

All dark!

A feeling of horror and despair threatened to seize upon Frank, but he fought it with all his wonderful will.

He was astonished by his fortune in keeping to the

track in such intense darkness, and it almost seemed that an unseen hand was guiding him.

Within the tunnel the track was remarkably smooth, which was a fortunate thing indeed.

The roaring increased, and Frank began to feel that the train was overtaking him with appalling swiftness. He was deafened by the volume of sound, and it seemed that the train must strike him in another instant.

Still the desperate, panting lad exerted all his strength in sending the bicycle flying along. He would not think of giving up until the fatal crash came.

It seemed that he rode hours in the darkness of the tunnel, with that frightful roar sounding in his ears. In truth, it was but a few moments, yet it was not strange that, in such frightful peril, every moment should seem an hour.

Wild fancies flitted through the boy's brain, and he seemed to see strange visions. He fancied he saw his own mangled and lifeless body lying in the tunnel after the train had passed.

A sudden gleam ahead! It was the opening of the tunnel.

With a prayer on his lips, Frank Merriwell used all his remaining strength to send the bicycle flying like the very wind toward that welcome patch of light. Hope was in his heart once more, but still the demon of destruction roared behind him.

And then—then Frank shot out into the open air, with the train close upon him.

Frank turned from the track as quickly as possible, bumped over the rail, shot down the bank, and fell exhausted from his wheel, the train whizzing past.

For a long time the boy lay there beside the track. A prayer of thankfulness escaped his lips. He watched the day turned to dusky night, the red light dying out of the west with remarkable swiftness.

"Come!" he muttered, at last; "this will not do."

He arose, but his knees were still weak. After a little, he picked up the bicycle, brought it back to the track, and mounted.

Then he rode onward, wondering how far it could be to the town where he was to meet his friends.

"They will be there ahead of me, but I do not care," he said. "I may consider myself fortunate to get there at all."

He rode slowly. The track ran through a valley, where it soon became very dark.

As Frank was riding along he saw a gleam of light ahead, and heard the ring of iron upon iron. Then he saw some dark forms in the gleam of a lantern, and they seemed to be at work on the track.

"Repairing," muttered Frank. "There must be something the matter with the track that causes them to work so late."

Then he saw that a rail was loose close by him.

Groaning, the boy fell back.

"It is too late! I cannot stop the train!"

There was a frightful sound of splintering, crashing wood and iron, and then an awful silence, followed by shrieks and groans.

The train was wrecked!

Staggering forward, he looked down on a scene of destruction, where, in the darkness, the engine and cars were piled in a shapeless mass beside the track.

Men had crept out of the ruins. A few had found lanterns and were moving about, calling wildly to each other.

Frank ran to the mass of wrecked cars, resolved to

do what he could to save human life. Soon he was working with others amid the ruins of the train.

As he worked, with the aid of a lantern which one of the trainmen had secured from the wreck, he was astounded to feel himself clutched by strong hands and see a blood-spattered face held close to his, while a hoarse voice shouted:

"Where is he? You know him! Where is he? Have you seen him?"

At first the boy thought it must be some passenger, crazed by his injuries, and seeking a friend who had been on the train.

"Be calm," he said. "We will find him."

"I must find him!" almost shrieked the man. "I knew he was on this train, and I clung beneath the car on which he rode that he might not escape me. He knew I was near, and that is why he took to flight. He feared me—he feared my vengeance!"

Frank grasped the light from the hand of the man at his side, and held it close to the blood-stained face.

"Wallace Clinton!" he shouted, amazed. "Baldy Briggs, the tramp! You here?"

"Yes, I am here," was the hoarse response. "I fol-

lowed him! He is here somewhere amid the wreck. I saw your notice in the papers, and I learned that you knew him."

"Lyman Lawrence?"

"Yes."

"And he was on this train?"

"Yes."

"Then he may be a dead man now."

They searched amid the ruins, and it was not long before they came upon the man for whom Wallace Clinton was looking. Judge Lawrence was there, pinned down by a great weight, his face ghastly pale, dying from his frightful injuries.

Clinton caught the lantern, held it close to his own face, and dropped on his knees beside his foe.

"Look, Lyman Lawrence!" he shouted, wildly—"look into my face! Open your eyes! Do you know me?"

With a moan of pain, the wretched man looked. What he saw did not seem to fill him with fear, but he faintly said:

"Yes, I know you; you are the man I wronged—the friend I betrayed. Laura still lives, but she has de-

spised me ever since she learned how I won her for my wife by making her believe you were false to her. I believe she loves you still. I feared you, for I knew you were mad for vengeance when you learned of my treachery. Then it was that I plotted and caused you to be thrown into prison. But now my punishment has come!"

He ceased from pure exhaustion. Clinton was silent, his wildness having passed away with the sight of his enemy. After a brief pause, Lawrence went on:

"I did hire men to destroy you, Clinton. They failed. I am glad of that now. This—this is my just reward! I am dying—dying far from my wife who never truly loved me, and the child who has ever feared me! All my property will fall to that wife and child. Go to her, Clinton; she will be happy to see you once again. Promise me that you will go to her."

"If I can—if I can!" whispered Clinton, huskily.

"That's all—that's all!" whispered the unfortunate wretch. "You will not be molested now. When I am dead there will be no reason why any one should harm you. This—this is retribution!"

His face showed how much he suffered mentally.

A strange change had come over Wallace Clinton. No longer was he fierce for vengeance. Something like compassion came into his eyes as he watched his dying enemy.

Suddenly the dying man turned and clutched Clinton's hand, almost shrieking:

"I am lost—lost! I know it—I feel it! Yet I shall die easier if I hear you say you forgive me! For—the—love—of—Heaven—say—it!"

Clinton was silent, but it seemed that a great battle was taking place within his soul.

"For—the—love—of—Laura — say—it!" huskily pleaded the dying man.

"Lyman Lawrence," said Wallace Clinton, solemnly, "I forgive you!"

A thankful sigh, a murmured prayer, a gasp, and the end had come. All was over.

It was not until early morning that Frank rejoined his chums at the nearby town.

When they heard of his adventure they were more than astonished.

"It beats the Dutch!" said Diamond. "I can't see how you got out of the tunnel alive."

Long afterward the boys heard that Wallace Clinton had married Lyman Lawrence's widow and both were truly happy.

What became of the two tramps, Pink and Bob, the boys never knew.

After this the days went by swiftly, and soon the bicycle boys found themselves crossing the mighty Mississippi and pedaling their way across the State of Missouri.

"I hope we have no more adventures," said Harry. "I've had wall I ant—no, all I want."

"Dun yo' say a word," came from Toots. "We ain't out ob de woods yet, not by a long shot, no, sah!"

And Toots' words proved true, as the very next chapter will show.

CHAPTER X.

A THRILLING ADVENTURE.

Crash! crash! crash!

"Fo' de Lawd's sakes, what am dat?" cried Toots, nearly falling from his bicycle in sudden alarm, as the crashing sounds came from amid the thick bushes of the woods through which the party was riding.

Crash! crash! crash!

The bushes shook, and small trees bent and swayed.

"Great Scott!" spluttered Harry. "It must be a cy smallcone—I mean a small cyclone!"

"Thank fortune I'm fat!" murmured Bruce. "It won't be able to pick me up and carry me off with ease."

"It is some kind of a creature—an animal, and a huge one, at that!" exclaimed Jack. "Look out for it!"

"It's an elephant!" rang out the voice of Frank, who was leisurely riding along behind the others. "See—here he comes!"

Sure enough out of the timber rushed a huge ele-

phant, its small eyes glaring wickedly, its trunk tossing convulsively, and its whole aspect denoting wild excitement and rage.

The moment the monster saw the boys, who were slowly riding past, he elevated his trunk and trumpeted shrilly.

"Horn ob Gabrul!" howled Toots, as he leaned forward over the handlebars and literally caused his wheel to jump forward. "If dat dar elumfunt done catch me, I's a daid nigger!"

"An elephant—an elephant running wild—out here—in Missouri!" palpitated Diamond. "Is this an optical illusion?"

"An elephant!" exclaimed Merriwell. "Are we in the United States, or India?"

"I wouldn't mind being in the next county about now!" confessed Browning, as he increased his speed.

The boys flew past the great beast, which came lumbering into the road in an awkward manner, continuing its shrill cries.

"We can run away from him easy enough," said Rattleton.

"We can run away from him on our wheels, but you

will find he can make pretty good speed, in case he comes after us," Frank declared.

"He's coming!" cried Jack, who had looked back.

This was true. As soon as the elephant reached the road, he turned in pursuit of the boys, the sight of whom had seemed to arouse the creature to a perfect frenzy.

"Well, this is a most remarkable adventure!" muttered Frank. "I anticipated that nearly all sorts of things would take place during our trip, but this is something I did not dream of at all."

"How does it happen that elephants are running wild in the forests of Missouri?" gurgled Bruce, as he puffed along heavily.

"Don't ask me!" cried Harry, who was at the big college lad's side. "I'll never tell!"

"I don't believe dat am no elumfunt," flung back the colored boy. "Dat am one ob dem dar mastydoons I hear Prof. Scotch tell ob one time."

"A mastodon wouldn't have surprised me more than this elephant," confessed Browning.

"And this elephant is on the rampage," said Jack. "He is out for trouble, that is sure enough."

The boys were not hurrying, with the exception of Toots, who had scooted ahead swiftly, but, of a sudden, Frank cried:

"Scoot, fellows—scoot! He is running us down!"

It was true that the huge beast was close upon them, and he was coming along the road at wonderful speed, which seemed to increase with each moment. The ground really seemed to tremble beneath his ponderous tread.

"Wheejiz!" gasped Rattleton. "I didn't suppose one of those creatures could run like that!"

"They can cover ground in great shape when they have open territory, my boy," said Frank.

"What if one of us should puncture a tire now?" gasped Browning, perspiration suddenly starting out in great beads on his face.

"It would be rather unfortunate," said Frank, gravely.

"That's right," nodded Diamond. "The elephant would trample him flat in less than three seconds."

"I propose to get out of this," said Rattleton. "Toots is the only one who has sense enough to hustle."

Still filled with wonder by the astonishing appearance

of the elephant, the boys wheeled onward at greater speed, and soon rode out of the strip of timber.

The great beast continued to follow.

Toots, in advance, came to a place where the road forked. Without hesitation, he took the right-hand road.

Frank still kept his place behind his companions, which was a point of some peril; but that peril was swiftly growing less and less, for the party was drawing away from the pursuing animal.

Rattleton was next to Toots, and just as he reached the point where the road divided, the very accident the boys had feared took place.

Pop—swish! Then his rear tire collapsed.

"A puncture!" he shouted, as he leaped from his wheel, and let it fall beside the road. What a scrape!"

Browning and Diamond flew past Rattleton before they could slacken the speed of their wheels.

The pursuing elephant trumpeted loudly in a triumphant manner, as if aware of the nature of the accident and confident of securing a victim on which to vent his wrath.

Harry turned pale as he cast a look backward and

saw the dirty-brown body of the enraged beast that was lumbering along the road in pursuit of the party.

"I'm in for it!" he gasped, and his knees felt weak beneath him.

But Merriwell had not passed. He seemed to be on the watch for the accident that had taken place, and, with wonderful agility, he leaped to the ground, bringing his wheel to a stop.

"Ready, Harry!" he cried, clearly. "This wheel must carry us both!"

"How'll we trick the do—er, do the trick?" excitedly asked Rattleton.

"You must run along beside me, as I get a fresh start, and then leap to my back when I give the word. It is the only way."

"All right."

"Ready?"

"Yes."

Frank started his wheel at a run, vaulted to the saddle, his feet catching the pedals in a moment.

Harry ran along at the same moment, and a glance backward caused his heart to leap in a convulsive manner.

"The elephant is right upon us, Frank!" he cried.

"Ready to jump!" called Merriwell, steadily, as once more the ground seemed to quiver beneath the feet of the pursuing beast.

"All ready!" Harry flung back.

"Now—jump!"

Following directly behind Merriwell, Harry made a spring into the air.

Frank had stooped forward and braced himself for the shock, but, despite the fact that he knew what was coming, he was nearly thrown from the wheel as Rattleton alighted like a monkey on his back.

Another wild blast came from the elephant, and it told that the great creature was close behind.

"Can you do it, Merry?" asked Harry, his voice shaking somewhat. "If you can't, say so, and I will drop off. It is better that one of us should be killed than that I should cause the death of both."

"Cling fast!" came over Merriwell's shoulder. "We are all right now. He can't overtake us!"

At first, however, it seemed that the monster would do so, and Rattleton expected to be torn from Merriwell's back at any moment. It was not long before

they were spinning along at a speed that was sure to keep them beyond the animal's reach.

"We have taken the wrong road," said Harry. "The boys went the other way."

"That's right," said Frank. "I did not notice it till it was too late to take the other road."

"I don't mind that if we can get away from the old rogue behind us, and it begins to look as if we might."

"We'll get away, although this does not seem to be a very good strip of road. He can't overtake——"

"Look there!"

Harry interrupted with the cry, and, looking ahead, Frank saw something that seemed to turn the blood cold in his veins.

A short distance in advance there had been a plank bridge across a small stream, but now the planks were all torn up by three men, who, it was plain, were at work constructing a new bridge.

Of the new bridge the stringers had been placed on the supports, but not a plank was in place!

The stream was not very wide, but it was wide enough to cause the boys to feel intense alarm, for

they knew the elephant must overtake them if they dismounted to cross.

A clear, ringing shout broke from Merriwell's lips, attracting the attention of the laborers at the bridge.

The elephant seemed to answer that shout with a shrill note.

The laborers looked up and stared stupidly, as if they doubted the evidence of their eyes.

"Look out!" cried Frank. "The elephant is mad! Run for your lives! Run, or he will kill you!"

One of the men awoke from his lethargy, and immediately took to his heels, shouting some words to his companions.

Frank did not abate his speed in the least, but, if anything, sent the wheel flying faster than ever.

"Frank, Frank, are you crazy?" gasped Harry.

"No."

"What are you going to do? The bridge is down!"

"I see it is."

"Stop! We will have to dismount to get across."

"If we dismount, we'll not get across."

"Then how——"

"Cling fast! It is our only show for getting across at all."

Straight at the bridge flew the bicycle, carrying its double burden. Harry gasped for breath, beginning to think Frank had lost his senses entirely.

By this time the remaining laborers realized their peril, and they were running from the spot as fast as their legs would take them.

In a moment the stream was reached. Out on one of the stringers darted the bicycle, where to swerve two or three inches at most must mean a disastrous plunge—a terrible catastrophe.

Straight as an arrow the bicycle sped along the narrow stringer, and the farthest bank of the stream was reached almost before Harry Rattleton could understand what had taken place.

"Hurrah!" cried Frank, with relief. "We did the trick, old man!"

Again Rattleton gasped for breath.

"Gand of loodness—I mean land of goodness!" he palpitated. "How did you do it, Merry—how could you?"

"Had to do it," was the cheerful answer. "A fel-

low can do almost anything when he has to, you know."

"But—how did you dare to try it, Frank?"

"Dare! What was there to dare? It was far more dangerous not to try it. This was a case of must."

"I'd never thought of trying such a thing—never!"

Frank laughed. It was his old reckless laugh—the laugh that escaped his lips in times of peril.

"Well, we are over the stream all right," he said; "but those workmen may have to suffer when the elephant arrives."

CHAPTER XI.

AN OLD FOE.

No longer could the boys hear the shrill trumpetings of the pursuing monster, and, looking to the left, they saw one of the laborers had halted and was staring back toward the stream.

"What's up?" asked Frank, curiously. "What has happened back there? Is the elephant still in pursuit?"

Harry managed to turn his head about till he could look over his shoulder, and then he said:

"No; the elephant has stopped at the stream. He is drinking. Hold on, Frank. Let's stop and see what he will do. We have a good start, and we can mount and get away before he can reach us, in case he starts after us again."

Frank was ready to stop, and so Harry dropped down, and the two lads soon were on their feet. They looked back, and saw that the elephant had stopped at

the stream, where he was now drawing up water with his trunk, and squirting it over his back.

"The water seems to have cooled his fury," observed Frank. "He acts as if he has quite forgotten us."

"I hope he continues to remain forgetful," said Harry, producing a handkerchief and mopping his face. "Goodness! but this has been something awful!"

"It has been rather invigorating," smiled Merriwell. "I wonder what sort of a racket we will run up against next."

"I am ready for anything after this," declared Harry. "Whose pet do you suppose that is, Frank?"

"Haven't an idea. I don't see any ribbon around its neck."

"No, not so much as a string."

The boys now devoted themselves to watching the elephant. The huge beast seemed to have forgotten them entirely. After squirting water over its back for a time, it contented itself with pulling down the stringers of the bridge, which caused the laborers at a distance to utter some violent language.

After a short time several horsemen were seen com-

ing rapidly along the road, their appearance indicating that they might be in pursuit of the elephant.

As soon as the horsemen saw the old fellow they drew up and approached with caution. There were at least a dozen of them, and, within five minutes, a cart came tearing along the road, drawn by two foaming, dust-covered horses. The horses were driven by a man who was standing erect and swinging a long whip, which he cracked about the animals' ears, every crack sounding like the report of a pistol.

"They are after the elephant, sure enough," said Frank. "It must be that the old fellow escaped from some circus. Let's join them, and see how they go to work to capture the beast."

"All right," agreed Harry, who was ready to follow Frank anywhere. "But we'll have to be careful."

"Oh, we'll not go up and twist the elephant's tail," laughed Merry.

"Not that kind of an elephant, although we have tailed the elephant's twist—I mean we have twisted the elephant's tail in New Haven more than once."

The men were surrounding the great beast, which paid not the slightest attention to them. The work-

men came down and joined the others, excitedly answering a hundred questions, a few of which were answered.

These answers were enough to let the boys know they were right in supposing the elephant had escaped from a circus company, which was to perform that day in a nearby town.

One of the pursuers was the elephant's trainer, and his name was Tom Fearson. He was giving orders to the others, and he harshly told the three laborers to keep out of the way, as they might get hurt if they took too much interest in things. The boys he did not seem to notice.

The wagon had brought great ropes and irons for binding the elephant, and these were in charge of three men, who awaited orders from Fearson.

The elephant quitted the bed of the stream, lumbered up the bank, and made his way to a tree, against which he lazily rubbed his body. The water had seemed to pacify the old fellow in a most remarkable manner, and yet Tom Fearson continued to caution his assistants not to be too careless in approaching the beast.

A little furnace had been brought along in the wagon. This was taken out and set up as soon as possible. Then a fire was lighted in it, and some wicked-looking irons were being heated in the fire.

"I wonder what they are going to do with them?" speculated Harry.

"The trainer means to use them to subdue the elephant," explained Frank. "Sometimes it is the only way old rogues can be conquered."

"Use hot irons? Goodness! Such a thing is barbarously biendish—I mean barbarously fiendish!"

"It does seem rather tough, but old trainers say many elephants require a good dose of hot irons at least once a year."

From the talk of the men, the boys learned that the name of the elephant was Napoleon, and that he had killed one trainer a year before. On this occasion, he had broken the back of a horse, and then torn down one of the smaller tents before escaping.

That the country roundabout knew of the escape was apparent, for men and boys were arriving constantly, the most of them eager to assist in capturing Napoleon.

The younger boys kept at a distance as far as possible, while the older lads and the men were warned of the danger of the undertaking, and informed that they were taking their own risk in approaching.

Napoleon seemed docile now, and it was difficult to believe that he was really dangerous.

The tree was surrounded, and the circle drew in upon the huge animal, moving slowly.

"Which o' you fellers is Frank Merriwell?" asked a boy, as he approached the two Yale lads.

"That is my name," assured Frank.

"Then you are the feller this is for."

The boy held out a slip of paper, which Frank took with some surprise.

"Who gave you this?" he asked.

"Oh, a feller over yander," was the answer, as the boy jerked his thumb toward the wagon. "He asked me to take it to one of you fellers that wuz named Frank Merriwell, an' he give me a quarter."

The boy displayed the money, with great satisfaction, as he added:

"This will take me to the circus."

Frank unfolded the slip of paper, on which were a

few penciled words written in a hasty scrawl with a lead pencil. This is what he read:

“Look out for yourself, Frank Merriwell. You have enemies near at hand, and they will not hesitate to injure you.
A FRIEND.”

Frank whistled.

“Hello! hello!” he muttered. “I wonder what this means?”

“What is it?” asked Harry.

Frank handed over the note, which Harry proceeded to read. When he had done so, he cried:

“What sort of bunny fizzes—I mean what sort of funny business is this?”

“That is what I’d like to know,” admitted Merriwell.

“Is it a jolly?”

“You tell.”

“Why should you have enemies near at hand?”

“Give it up, but I seem to have them everywhere.”

Frank took the note and studied it a few seconds. Then he said:

“I believe I know this writing, for it looks natural,

but I can't tell when and where I've seen writing like it."

"Bah!" exclaimed Rattleton. "Don't take any stock in it. It is some sort of a game; but how any one out here should know your name is what sticks me."

"It is a mystery."

"Find out who sent this."

"I will. Where is the boy that brought it?"

But they looked around in vain for the youngster, who had vanished while they were talking.

"He's gone."

"That's what he has," nodded Harry; "and that makes me think all the more that it is some sort of a game."

"Well, I will keep this note to look over when I get a chance to do so. Just now I am interested to see how they are going to recapture the elephant."

Frank thrust the note into his pocket, and, within a minute, had quite forgotten about the mysterious warning.

The elephant was surrounded, and Fearson was working to get the old fellow snared with one of the stout cables. The cable was attached to the tree, near

which the elephant had been a short time before, and then, with a long, sharp-pointed iron, the trainer charged in on the great beast.

The elephant saw Fearson coming, and turned ponderously. As he turned, Fearson darted nimbly past, and a loop of the great rope was cast about the creature's leg.

Then the trainer drove the sharp iron into the beast's thick hide, and fled for his life.

With a hoarse note of fury, Napoleon started in pursuit of the man. In a moment he reached the end of the cable, and then came a shock, for the elephant was flung to the ground with a jarring thud.

Again Fearson rushed forward, but he had been drinking, as Frank had observed, and, making a misstep, he stumbled and fell.

The elephant was scrambling up, and the trainer lay as if stunned. Not one of the circus men offered to go to his aid.

Instantly Frank Merriwell broke through the line, leaped forward, lifted the man to his feet, and sent him spinning out of the reach of danger.

Then it was that Frank found another person at his

shoulder; then it was that he saw and recognized one of his bitterest enemies of Yale; then it was that he received a thrust that was half a blow, and that thrust sent him reeling to fall within a few yards of the once more infuriated old rogue.

The elephant was getting up, and its ugly little eyes were fastened on the fallen boy. He had decided that Frank should become a victim, and it seemed that Merriwell would not find it easy to escape.

But Harry Rattleton had seen Frank rush forward to the trainer's rescue, and he had not been slow to follow. He had seen another person rush forward, and he had seen that other person give Frank a savage thrust.

A cry of rage broke from Rattleton's lips, and then he leaped toward his fallen comrade.

Frank was trying to rise quickly, but he felt himself lifted with a snap, swung about, and literally carried from the spot.

Napoleon, wildly venting his rage, rushed after the boys, but again he brought up at the end of the cable, and again he was thrown heavily to the ground.

Frank had saved the trainer, and he had been rescued by Rattleton.

"Close call, old man!" panted Harry, as he dropped Frank.

Frank whirled about, hoarsely demanding:

"Where is he?"

"Whom?"

"Evan Hartwick."

"Was it Hartwick who struck you?"

"Yes, Hartwick, my old enemy—the man who was forced to leave Yale in order to avoid disgrace! I saw him at my shoulder, and he gave me the thrust that hurled me to the ground. My old foe is here! There was something in the warning."

There was an excited crowd around the elephant, but Frank saw a suit of a loud pattern in the midst of the crowd, and toward that suit he sprang.

Merriwell soon had Evan Hartwick by the collar.

"I knew I was not mistaken!" he cried, triumphantly.
"So you are here, you scoundrel!"

"Yes, I am here!" grated Evan, his face livid with rage.

Then, with all his force, he struck straight at Frank's face.

Merriwell dodged, and avoided the blow. In the twinkling of an eye, he struck back, and Evan Hartwick measured his length upon the ground.

"That's right!" burst from Rattleton. "Stuff the hammering out of him—I mean hammer the stuffing out of him! It's what he needs!"

But Frank was not the sort of fellow to hit an enemy when that enemy was down, and so he waited for Hartwick to arise.

One of the circus men caught Frank by the collar, and pulled him away, saying, hoarsely:

"Here! here! quit yer fightin', youngkers! This ain't no time for that kind of business."

Hartwick improved the opportunity to scramble to his feet and get out of the way, showing he did not care to again encounter Merriwell face to face.

"Follow him, and give him fits! Mark him, old man!"

"What's the use?" cried Frank. "I knocked him down all right, but I am ashamed to do anything more. I feel that I have soiled my hands already."

"If you don't, I will!"

Harry would have rushed after Hartwick, but Frank caught him by the arm, and held him fast, saying, swiftly:

"It is my affair, chum, and I will attend to it without aid. I say let him go. I rather think one of his eyes will be in mourning to-morrow."

"He ought to be thumped till he couldn't see for a month! Do you did what he know—I mean do you know what he did? Why, the miserable whelp knocked you down hoping the elephant would kill you! It was a rank attempt at murder!"

"And it failed, as all of his attempts to harm me have failed. In return he received a beautiful punch in the eye. He may have deserved more, but I think we'll have to let him off with that."

Harry was not satisfied, but he was forced to yield, and thus Hartwick escaped with light punishment for his dastardly attempt.

CHAPTER XII.

TAMING AN ELEPHANT.

The snared elephant was raging about the tree in the greatest fury, and, in this way, the beast soon entangled itself most helplessly with the stout cable.

Then Tom Fearson's assistants brought up the small furnace, and, with a wicked look in his eyes, the half-drunken trainer examined the heating irons.

"Not enough yit," he growled. "Make 'em white hot. Napoleon won't give up easy ter-day."

The irons were thrust back into the fire, and the heating continued.

In the meantime the old rogue had again thrown himself to the ground, and two of the men slipped loops over two of the creature's other legs, the ends in nearly opposite directions, placing them in the hands of the men and boys who stood ready to do anything to assist in the subjugation of the great beast.

Now the elephant was helplessly thrown, but he con-

tinued to send shrill blasts of rage from his trunk, which waved in the air like a signal of defiance.

Already that trunk was scarred in a frightful manner, every scar telling of the torture which had been inflicted on the rebellious old rogue at some former time.

Again Fearson examined the irons. This time they were hot enough to suit him, and he selected one of them, with which he quickly approached the captive elephant.

Napoleon saw Fearson coming, and saw the iron in his hand. Then the great beast struggled with fierce despair, screaming forth its fear and rage.

"Oh, I'll fix yer!" grated Fearson, as he flourished the iron. "I'll fix yer so yer won't trouble me ag'in fer a year!"

Taking care not to get near enough for the elephant to strike him with its trunk, Fearson suddenly thrust forth the long iron, and there was a hissing sound, as of frying meat, while a whiff of smoke arose in the air.

Napoleon had been burned on the trunk.

The anger of the monster was something frightful to witness, and it seemed that he would break the great

cables that held him. It took the united strength of the crowd to keep him from getting on his feet.

Fearson laughed in a brutal manner.

"I'll tame yer!" he said, with satisfaction. "I'll make yer beg before I let up, you old devil!"

Again and again he burned the elephant's trunk, which is the tenderest part of the creature, being the most sensitive to pain.

Napoleon was stubborn, and the great beast refused to give up for a time. Fearson changed irons, and resumed the burning of the animal, snarling:

"I'll cook yer whole trunk if yer don't beg, dern yer! Beg, I tells yer—beg! beg! beg!"

"It makes me sick, Frank!" muttered Harry, as he turned away. "It is something awful to see!"

"It is not a pleasant spectacle," admitted Merriwell; "but I have been told that it is the only way to conquer some of the creatures. An ugly elephant is not easily subdued."

"I should say not!"

For nearly ten minutes the trainer continued to apply the hot irons to the elephant. At last the creature lifted its trunk, and uttered a plaintive sound.

Fearson laughed triumphantly.

"That's right!" he cried; "beg, you old villain—beg! beg! I knew I could bring you to it!"

Then he cast aside the irons, saying to his assistants:

"It's all right now; Napoleon has given up, and there will be no further trouble with him."

Without the least hesitation, he advanced upon the elephant, and the creature made no attempt to do him harm.

"That man has been drinking too much," said Frank; "but he seemed to know how to bring the old rogue to time."

"He is built for that sort of a job," said Harry, in disgust. "His face shows he likes it."

"Every man to his calling. I presume elephant trainers are necessary in order to handle the elephants in the menageries."

"But it does seem that there must be some more humane manner of subduing them when they get ugly."

Fearson now proceeded to release Napoleon from his bonds in the most fearless manner.

"Is it possible he is going to set the creature free?" gasped Harry.

"It looks that way," nodded Frank.

"Hadn't we better be getting out of this? Napoleon may take a fancy to wreak vengeance on us as soon as he is at liberty."

"I hardly think so. The elephant seldom is a tricky animal, and when it promises to behave, it does so in good faith. Napoleon has promised to behave."

In a short time the beast was able to arise. It got up slowly, and stood with its trunk dangling straight down.

As Frank and Harry were watching Diamond, Browning and Toots appeared.

"Well, this beats the band!" drawled Bruce, in his lazy way. "We saw you running away from the elephant, Merry, with Rattleton on your back, and so we kept right on, thinking the roads must come together somewhere."

"But we found they did not," said Diamond.

"Dot war after we had done rode many as fo'teen mile," declared the colored boy. "Den we had teh turn roun' an' ride all dat way back."

"Toots didn't want to come back," said Jack.

"Now, don't yeh go teh slanderin' me, boy!" cried

the colored lad. "I war jes' habin' mah li'l' joke, dat am all."

"He was afraid of the elephant," explained Bruce.

"Horn ob Josh'way! mebbe yo' don' been 'fraid ob de elumfunt at all, boy! Why, yeh was so' fraid it am a plumb wondah yo' ain't runnin' erway on yeh bisuckle now!"

"We found your wheel at the forks of the road, and brought it along, Harry," said Jack.

"For which I am much obliged," said Rattleton. "It saved me the trouble of going after it."

Then Jack and Bruce questioned Frank and Harry, and the boys described the whole of their adventure with the elephant, ending with telling of the mysterious warning and the dastardly assault of Evan Hartwick.

"Hartwick here?" cried Diamond, a flush of anger coming to his face. "How does that happen, Merry?"

"I do not know," admitted Frank. "All I do know is that he is here, and he tried to finish me."

"For which little trick he got off with one black eye," put in Rattleton. "That was cheap."

"So it was," agreed Diamond. "I'd like to see him long enough to make the other eye a mate!"

"If you are going to ride along with us, Harry," said Frank, "you'd better mend the puncture in your tire."

"That's right," nodded Rattleton; "and I can use the elephant trainer's fire to heat my wire, for burning out the hole."

All the boys carried repair kits, so that they could mend an ordinary puncture anywhere. Harry got his out, and obtained liberty to heat the wire in the little furnace. Then, surrounded by an interested and wondering crowd of Missouri country folk, who discovered in the mending of the tire an attraction that rivaled the sight of the elephant, Harry went to work.

In less than ten minutes the puncture was mended and the tire blown up.

Some time later, when the procession started for town, with Tom Fearson leading the now docile and quiet Napoleon, the bicycle boys mounted their wheels and pedaled along with the crowd, getting into town near ten o'clock.

The place was in great excitement. The "Grand and Gorgeous Street Parade and Pageant" of Springer & Spofford's "Unequaled and Unrivalled Consolidated Shows and Menagerie" was billed to take place at 11

o'clock A. M., and already the roads leading into town were thronged with country people on their way to witness the free exhibition and balloon ascension.

They were flocking into the place in all sorts of conveyances, and not a few were coming on foot.

Without delay, the boys hastened to a hotel and ordered dinner, which, fortunately, they were able to have served in short order. By the time the hour of the parade arrived the young tourists had satisfied their hunger, and were ready to "see the sights."

By this time the principal street of the town was lined with people, all of whom seemed eager for the appearance of the procession.

"I have an idea, fellows," said Frank, as they stood in front of the hotel.

"Give it to us," invited Diamond.

"I'll bet a cigarette it is something to cause us labor and trouble," drawled Browning, languidly. "That is the trouble with all of Merry's schemes. If he'd think of some restful sort of scheme some time, it would be a great relief."

"You are a regular Weary Willie," said Rattleton.

"If you keep on resting and eating, you'll make a first-class fat man in the side show of some circus."

"That would be an easy way to make a living," murmured Bruce.

"It wouldn't be long before you'd not have energy enough to draw your salary, to say nothing about your breath."

"You are very frivolous, young man," reproached Bruce. "You may not be aware that I traveled with a show once on a time."

"What sort of a show?"

A theatrical company, playing at nothing but first-class houses."

"How did you obtain your engagement? Was the manager crazy?"

"No; but the audience was after watching me act a while."

This was said in Browning's dryest manner, and it produced a burst of laughter from the others.

"Hello!" exclaimed Jack, pointing to a genuine tramp who was loafing along the street; "that fellow needs clothes bad."

"He has them that way," smiled Frank. "I don't see how they could be worse."

The tramp noticed the boys, and immediately approached them.

"Excuse me, young gents," he said, touching the brim of his tattered hat with an attempt at a military gesture; "yer sees in me a sample o' hard luck—der hardest kind o' luck. Wot I needs is a lift. I tole a man dat back here, an' he give me one—wid his boot. It's not dat sort I'm lookin' fer, young gents. You looks well fed an' prosperous, an' I t'ought yer might cough up a quarter for a poor devil wid a t'irst bigger'n a house."

"I am shocked!" exclaimed Rattleton, with mock seriousness. "It can't be that you drink?"

"Not warter, young gent—excuse me. W'en I was a young feller a doctor tole me I had an iron constitution. Ever since den I've shunned warter, fer I don't wish ter rust me constitution."

This was said in a whimsical manner, and brought another laugh from the boys.

"Seriously," said Diamond, "what drove you to drink in the first place?"

"A hackman. I had money ter burn in dem days, pal."

"That's one on you, Jack," smiled Frank. Then he turned to the tramp, and asked: "Are you ever sober?"

"Not on purpose," instantly answered the hobo.

"Sir," said Browning, languidly, "what is the great drink question?"

"Wot'll yer take?"

"That is right; but, if I were in your place, I'd take a hammer to my voice."

"T'anks. A hammer wouldn't be no good, pal, arter some o' der t'ings I have taken to it."

"What is your name?" inquired Frank.

"Well, yer sees, I was named Henry; but me mudder uster call me Hen. Dat was because I was alwus layin' 'round."

By this time the boys were in such good humor that Frank said:

"That is worth a quarter, and here you have it."

He flipped the tramp a quarter, which was caught in the most skillful manner. Then the hobo touched his hat again, expressed his thanks in a fluent flow of language, and hastened away.

A short time later the sound of a blatant band was heard in the distance, indicating that the parade was approaching.

"By Jove!" cried Frank; "I nearly forgot my idea, of which I was speaking."

"Is it too late to give it to us now?"

"No. It is this: Why not take out wheels and fall in behind the procession? Our uniforms would attract attention, and it might be an advertisement for old Yale."

To this the lads immediately agreed, and they hastened to don their sweaters and bring out their bicycles.

Down the street came the parade, headed by the band in a battered wagon that had once been gaudy with paint and gilt. Following the band were men and women in soiled finery, mounted on tired-looking horses, cages of "wild" animals, ponies, broncos, "real" cowboys, clowns, and, "last but not least," Napoleon, "the Wonderful Trained Elephant, Intelligent as a Human Being, Harmless as a Child."

Next to the band wagon rode "Mlle. Fatima, Queen of the Air;" and "Little Lotta, the Child Wonder."

The woman was painted and powdered and scrawny; the child was blue-eyed, golden-haired and flowerlike.

"Look at them!" exclaimed Frank, with sudden interest. "You can see what that woman has become. Is it possible that innocent-looking child will ever be like her?"

"It is probable that she will if she follows the same sort of life the woman has led," said Jack.

"It's a shooming blame—I mean a blooming shame!" spluttered Rattleton, excitedly. "The Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children should take hold of the case."

"Dat am a fac'," nodded Toots, wisely.

Browning did not make a remark; it was too much of an effort for him to do so.

The crowd stared in open-mouthed wonder at the parade. They gasped when the cage of "Untamed African Lions" came along, with "Prof. Wallace, the Greatest Animal Trainer in the World," seated between the two toothless old beasts, occasionally flourishing a heavy whip.

The children were convulsed by the clowns, who made funny faces and did other idiotic things. They

were delighted by the sight of the ponies, and filled with wonder at the size of the miserable elephant, failing to note the terrible scars and burns on the trunk of the unfortunate animal.

"Look at that man Fearson!" urged Diamond, pointing at Napoleon's master. "I believe he is drunker than he was when we first saw him."

"That's what he is," nodded Frank. "Why, he can scarcely stagger along. He is a healthy sort of elephant trainer!"

"If Napoleon should take a fancy to obtain revenge, he'd not have much trouble to do up Fearson," observed Rattleton.

Then came a surprise for them all. The last carriage of the procession was a light buggy, driven by a black boy. On an elevated seat in the buggy was a youth in a suit adorned with an abundance of gold lace. In a loud voice the youth was announcing a free open-air exhibition and balloon ascension immediately on the arrival of the procession at the circus grounds.

"May I be hanged!" cried Rattleton. "So that's the jink of a kob—I mean the kind of a job Hartwick has with this circus!"

"He has to do something, you know, after his old man turned him out to shift for himself," murmured Browning.

It was, indeed, Hartwick. He saw the boys on the steps of the hotel, and the words suddenly died on his tongue. He glared at Frank, and his face was convulsed with a look of the most intense hatred.

"See him smile on you, Merry!" chuckled Harry, giving Frank a nudge.

Merriwell returned Hartwick's look with one of mingled scorn and pity, causing the lad in the carriage to turn away, muttering a savage exclamation.

"Really I am sorry for him," declared Frank. "He had ungovernable passions, and they have worked his downfall. He was born with a temperament that will be his final ruin. He was not considered such a bad fellow at Yale till he became jealous of me and tried to injure me."

"He was not considered bad, but he was bad at heart, just the same," stiffly declared Diamond.

"Well, we'll not argue about that point," said Frank. "Come on ; we'll fall in behind, and follow to the circus grounds."

CHAPTER XIII.

THE SHELL GAME.

At the circus grounds a great crowd assembled. There were several kinds of side shows in small tents, lemonade and peanut stands, fakirs who were selling "solid cold watches" for fifty cents each, and scores of other schemes to snare and swindle the unwary and unsophisticated.

The principal side show, which was connected with the circus, was in full blast beneath a small tent, in front of which was strung a long series of weird and astounding oil paintings on huge squares of canvas, representing all sorts of impossible things, from the "Wonderful Wild Man of New Zealand" to a "Real Mermaid, Captured Alive in the South Sea."

In front of the entrance to this tent, standing on an elevated platform, and shouting his alluring descriptions of the marvels to be seen within, was the announcer for the side show, a decidedly tough-looking young man.

From the peak of the center pole of the great tent to the ground ran a wire, down which it was announced Little Lotta would "coast with the speed of the wind, suspended by the hair of her head."

Not far from the large tent was an inflated balloon, secured to the ground by strong ropes, and in this balloon "Prof. Andre" was to make his "breathless, brain-bewildering ascension into the dim remoteness of distant space."

The announcer in front of the side show continued to tell the crowd that the big show would not begin for more than an hour, and the box office in the ticket wagon would not be opened for more than half an hour, giving every one a chance to witness all the wonders of the free exhibition and side show.

Arriving at the ground, the young tourists left their bicycles in charge of Toots, and wandered around.

"This is a great and glorious day for red lemonade and peanuts," laughed Harry. "It is just hot enough to make the lemonade look cool and inviting, and the peanuts are bound to add to the thirst of whoever indulges in them."

"Look at the crowd of jays around that fellow over

there," said Jack. "Let's see what sort of a game he is running."

The boys pushed into the crowd, soon obtaining a position where they could see what was taking place.

Then it was that Rattleton came near shouting out an exclamation of wonder.

"Smoly hoke—no, holy smoke!" he gasped. "Do you see him, Frank? do you see the bird who is running this skin business?"

"Yes, I see him," said Merriwell, calmly.

"It's—it's Rolf Harlow, from New Haven!" came from Diamond's lips.

Bruce said nothing, but there was a grunting sound in his throat, and that sound was very expressive.

"Harlow—Harlow, the shard carp—I mean the card sharp!" palpitated Rattleton. "Harlow, the crooked gambler! And he is at his old tricks."

"That's what he is," said Frank. "He seems determined to get his living in a dishonest manner."

In front of Harlow was a stand, on which were three ordinary half-shells of walnuts. Besides those shells there was a small black ball, about as large as a pea. Harlow was rolling the ball about, now and then

covering it with a shell, while a perfect stream of smooth, suave language flowed from his mouth.

“Here, gentlemen,” said Rolf, “you see an honest game of chance—a game at which any man of average intelligence and clear eyes may win a small fortune. Watch the little joker, gentlemen—see it roll. Now it is hidden from view. The shells are all down, and I’ll go you something there is not a man here who can pick out the shell that covers the little fellow.”

“Oh, shucks!” cried a lank man, with long, tobacco-stained whiskers. “That’s easy. Whir be you frum that you think yer can fool fo’kes with that trick, mister?”

“I am from the East—the raw and unsophisticated East,” answered Harlow, with a smile. “It is possible that the people of the East are more easily deceived than you smart, snappy, up-to-date Westerners. Living in crowded cities, as the Eastern people do, their eyes become weakened and their sight shortened, till it is not such a difficult thing to deceive them. Out here, where you have wide tracts of Nature’s most glorious domain to gaze upon, it is but natural that your

eyes should be keener and sharper than the eyes of the men who are shut in between the dark walls that crowd and shadow the streets of an Eastern city. In the East I made a great deal of money. Here is some of it."

He displayed a huge roll of bills, bright and crisp and new. The bill on the outside of the roll was worth a hundred dollars, and the sight of all that money caused the country people to gasp and stare greedily.

"I am willing to lose all this money in trying to fool some of you people out here," Harlow continued. "I have lost some of it already, and you may break me here. If you do, I'm going to quit trying to fool Westerners, and go back East, where the graft is easy. So walk right up, gentlemen, and relieve me of my ducats. You will be welcome to them—if you win them. And you will win them if you find the shell beneath which the little joker is hidden. Now watch it again. Here it goes. Hickro, domino, presto—I'll bet there isn't a person present who can tell which shell it is under."

"The middle one," called a voice.

"What's that?" cried Harlow, in pretended surprise.

"How can it be there? Aren't you mistaken, sir? It must be under one of the end ones."

"No, sir," persisted the voice; "it is under the middle one."

"Shall I lift the middle shell?" asked Rolf.

"Yes."

"All right."

The shell was lifted, and the pea was shown beneath it.

"Say, that's what I told you!" cried Harlow, in pretended anger and disgust. "Your eyes are too sharp for me. I think I will close up now, and quit business before I begin."

He made a pretense of gathering up his outfit, and then seemed to change his mind, saying:

"No, gentlemen, I'll not be frightened away in this manner. I see some of you are laughing. I do not like to be laughed at. I am willing to lose five hundred dollars before I quit. Somebody will get that five hundred. Who is the lucky man? Here goes the little joker again, gentlemen. Watch him. Ha! you think he is under the end now—I know you do."

"Not much," called the same voice. "He is under the other end."

Harlow lifted the shell indicated, and there lay the tiny black ball.

"This is what I call very provoking!" he exclaimed. "Still, you are losing money, sir. If you had been betting, you would have a slice of my roll now. Ten dollars for one, remember. If you put up five dollars and name the shell that covers the pea, you get fifty dollars in return. Ten dollars wins a hundred, and so on in the same proportion. Now, who makes the first trial? Here goes the little fellow again. Watch him! watch him! I am going to do my best to deceive you this time. Ah! now he is settled, and who will name the shell that covers him?"

A young man, roughly dressed, pushed to the front and lay down a five-dollar bill, saying:

"I'll go yer that much. If I win, I get fifty?"

"Sure, my friend. Name the shell, and you receive the fifty flat. Which is it now?"

"That one thar."

The shell was lifted, and there lay the pea.

"Here you get your money," said Harlow, as he counted out fifty dollars. "Try it again?"

"Yes. I'll go yer ten this time."

"All right. Watch the little joker. See the jolly little fellow roll. Here he goes, and there he goes. Now he is gone. Where is he? Locate him, and you receive a cold hundred for your ten."

"Middle one."

"Be careful! You want to be sure this time."

"Middle one."

Harlow scowled.

"Shall I lift the middle one?"

"Yes."

"All right."

The shell was lifted, and the pea was there.

"A hundred you win, sir," said Harlow, as he counted out the money. "That's what I call getting good money easy. But you are too much for me—I can see that. This is your last chance. You must give others an opportunity to get some of this wealth, for I see they are anxious. No person can have more than three shots at me in succession, win or lose. Here

goes the joker again. - Your last chance. Where is he?"

"I'll bet a hundred dollars I can pick out the shell!" cried the one who had won twice.

"All right. You get a thousand if you win, and that is a small fortune for any man. Are you ready? Choose."

"Middle one, ag'in."

With an exclamation of apparent fury, Harlow lifted the middle shell, and the black pea was exposed once more.

"Now, that is what I call wretched luck—for me!" he growled, as he counted out the money. "I said I would lose five hundred, and I have lost more than a thousand. Well, I am glad you can't choose again, sir! Take your money and leave. I am so deep in the hole that I shall try to see if I can't recover some of it. If every man who tries this game has your luck, I shall be busted in a short time."

The winner took his money, and, laughing triumphantly, turned away.

He was Evan Hartwick.

"Well, that is what I call rather slick!" smiled Frank

Merriwell. "Hartwick and Harlow are working the snap together. Hartwick is Harlow's capper, and they do the thing very well. Now we'll see a rush of hay-seeds, who will be eager to get some of Harlow's money before it is all gone."

"But where did he get so much money?" asked Diamond, in wonder. "He must be loaded with it."

"He must be. It is plain that they have been catching any amount of suckers out this way, or that stuff is counterfeit."

"Hartwick gets his clothes changed pretty soon after the procession reaches the grounds," said Rattleton. "He was flashily dressed while making his announcements with the parade."

"It is plain that he makes a great rush to get around and give Harlow a lift. But look at the jays now who are thirsting to lose their money."

Around Harlow's table was an eager crowd of men who were fairly trembling with excitement and eager greed. They pushed and shoved each other, fearing they would be too late to secure a portion of the money remaining in Rolf Harlow's possession.

"Don't get excited, gentlemen," said the slick young

sharp, with a calm smile. "I shall endeavor to accommodate you all. When you have cleaned me out, I'll shut up shop, but I'm bound to last quite a while. This is not all the money I have. There is more where this roll came from. Now be quiet, and watch the little joker. Here you see him, a common black ball. He is a lively fellow. See him roll. Now he is gone, and I defy you to tell where he is. This is business. Ten dollars for every one you stake, if you find the little joker."

"Gosh!" gurgled Harry Rattleton. "He'll make a big haul, if he catches every fellow who wants to put up something."

"But he shall not catch them!" exclaimed Frank.

Then, with surprising strength, Frank tore the crowd apart, and forced himself to the front, his clear voice ringing out:

"Hold on, gentlemen! Wait a moment before you put up any money. I have something to tell you."

The crowd was not pleased by this interruption. Some growled and muttered, while others tried to push Frank back.

But the young Yale man was not to be stopped. He reached the front, and there he distinctly cried:

"I know this fellow who is running the game."

Harlow turned pale and shook with rage.

"Merriwell!" he gasped.

"I know him well," Frank went on; "and I assure you that he is a thoroughbred crook. There is not an honest bone in his body, and he will beat you out of your money, if you put your money up."

"Liar!" grated Harlow, choking with intense passion.

"How do you know so much?" asked one of the would-be gamblers.

"I know it because this is not the first time I have seen him work his crooked game," declared Frank. "This is not the first time I have exposed him in his swindling operations."

"How about the young feller that won a thousand dollars?" asked another.

"He is this chap's friend and capper. They stand in together. He is the one who made the announcements from the rear end of the parade as it passed through town. He has changed his clothes, and does

not look the same, that is all. It was arranged that he should win, so that others might be induced to play. That is the whole trick, and you will lose everything, if you try to beat this young swindler at his own game."

"It is a lie, gentlemen!" cried Harlow, his voice trembling. "This fellow has a grudge against me, and he is trying to injure me. That is the truth. Do not believe a word he says."

"It is straight goods, gentlemen," asserted Jack, as he reached Merriwell's side. "I can swear that the fellow over there is a swindler, for I have been beaten by him myself."

"And I am in the same boat," confessed Harry, joining his friends. "He difed me kneep—I mean he knifed me deep; and he will knife you, if you play his game. That is what he intends to do."

"Which is correct," murmured Bruce, who was the last to come forward. "The slick rascal's name is Harlow, and he was run out of an Eastern town for playing poker with marked cards."

A murmur arose on the air, growing louder and louder. Harlow found himself surrounded by scowl-

ing faces, and he suddenly realized that he was in danger. He grew pale, looking around in a manner that showed he contemplated flight.

The murmur swelled to a sullen roar.

"Grab him!" shouted a hoarse voice.

Then Rolf Harlow realized that he was in peril, and he made a desperate break to get away. Thrusting those near him aside, and abandoning his outfit for swindling, he dashed through the crowd and took to his heels.

CHAPTER XIV.

LITTLE LOTTA.

"Well," languidly drawled Bruce, as he watched the shouting pursuers disappear around the big tent, "Mr. Harlow had better hurry right along, or he may be rumped."

Then the boys turned and found Frank reading some writing on a slip of paper.

"What have you there, old man?" asked Diamond.

"Another warning."

"When did you get it?"

"At the moment when the crowd started after Harlow. It was thrust into my hand by some person."

"You did not see who thrust it into your hand?"

"No."

"What does it say?"

Then Frank read as follows:

"Beware, Frank Merriwell; heed my warning. If you remain here, your enemies are bound to do you some great injury. Go on your way. If you do not, you will be sorry.
A FRIEND."

"Who is this friend who is taking so much trouble to warn you in such a mysterious manner?" said Jack, perplexed.

"You can answer the question as well as I can," confessed Frank.

"I do not believe it is a friend," broke out Harry. "I believe it is Hartwick, who is trying to frighten you away."

"You are wrong in that."

"Why?"

"Hartwick knows me better than to think for a moment that I could be frightened away in such a manner."

"That is true," nodded Rattleton. "Hartwick would not try that kind of a game on Merry, you bet!"

"Then who——"

"That is the question," said Frank. "If it is not an enemy trying to frighten me away, it must be a friend; but why any one should take so much interest in me is more than I can understand."

The more the boys studied over the matter, the more puzzled they became. Why any one should take so

much trouble to warn Merriwell, and keep in the background all the while, was a mystery not easy to solve.

There was a movement of the crowd toward the largest tent, and then it was seen that Little Lotta was preparing for her trip down the taut wire.

Sitting on a seat like that of a swing, the seat being attached to a block that ran on the wire, the child was drawn to the very peak of the center pole of the great tent.

She was dressed all in white, and laughed and kissed her hands to the crowd during the ascent, but Frank, who had been near at the start, fancied there was a frightened look in her eyes. Merriwell had heard her talking to Tom Fearson, who was at the lower end of the wire, and she had tremblingly said:

"You'll be sure to catch me and save me from coming down hard and being hurt, Mr. Fearson—you won't fail?"

"Of course not—hic!—you little fool!" Fearson coarsely answered. "What's ther matter with yer! Go 'long, before I box yer ears!"

"Please don't strike me!" pleaded the child, as she cowed like a dog that fears its master.

"The brute!" muttered Frank.

Then two men pulled away at the line that drew the child to her perilous position above the loftiest part of the great tent, where she hovered like a little white angel, seeming to hesitate about taking that frightful plunge down the wire.

Some arrangement had been made so the child was able to attach her hair to the small block that ran on the wire.

This Lotta did, while the crowd of spectators watched her with breathless interest.

The swinging seat, which had been removed from the block, was left attached to the line by which the child had been drawn up. Then the little girl poised herself for the descent.

A moment later she unfolded a pair of snowy white wings, and then she came shooting down the wire, looking like an angel descending to earth.

Frank had been watching Tom Fearson, and he saw the drunken elephant trainer was paying very little attention to the girl. Fearson was heedless, and he turned to look away, after giving the signal for Lotta to descend.

"Confound him!" muttered Frank, springing forward.

Then Fearson turned, and, as the child came rushing into his arms, caught her in a bungling fashion.

Lotta uttered a cry of pain, and the last bit of color fled from her pretty face, as if she were about to faint.

"What d'yer want to squawk fer?" snarled Fearson, as, staggering from the shock, not having been well balanced on his feet when she struck his arms, he barely succeeded in keeping from falling.

The girl did not reply, but Frank saw she was gasping for breath.

Fearson gave her a savage shake, hissing in her ear:

"Why don't yer answer w'en I speak ter yer? W'at's the matter with yer? Don't play none of yer flip-flap business on me!"

"Don't!" gasped the child. "You are hurting me!"

"Rot!" growled the brute, repeating the shake. "You want me—hic!—ter think ye're soft and delicate, but——"

The man was suddenly astonished to feel the little girl snatched from his arms, while a hand fastened on his collar, and a voice cried in his ear:

"You big brute!"

A second later Fearson was sent whirling from the spot, spinning round and round, like a top, till he lost his balance and fell heavily to the ground.

It was Frank who had dared thus to lay hands on the elephant trainer, and, as he held the little girl gently in his arms, he softly said:

"Don't be afraid; I'll not harm you. Where is your dressing-tent?"

She looked up at him, wonderingly.

"Why!" she exclaimed; "you are not one of the men!"

"No."

"If you had been, you would not have dared touch him."

"Perhaps not."

"Oh, they all fear him—everybody fears him! He has such an awful temper! He'd as lief kill any one as not!"

"I don't doubt it. A man who can take delight in torturing an elephant must be a murderous brute."

"He is sure to hurt you. Aren't you afraid now?"

"No, dear, I am not afraid of him. I rather fancy

he is a coward at heart, although he likes to play the bully."

"If you knew him, you'd be afraid—I know you would."

Then Frank again asked the child the way to the dressing-tent, and, when she had shown him, still holding her in his arms, he hurried in that direction, watched by the wondering spectators.

Fearson sat up, and looked around in a drunken way, but he was so bewildered that it took him some time to get his eyes on Frank. At last, he saw the young college lad, just as Merriwell bore Little Lotta into the dressing-tent.

"Hey!" roared Fearson; "drop her!"

But Merriwell did not seem to hear him.

Then the elephant trainer began to curse, and he tried to scramble to his feet, but fell over in a helpless heap.

"Let me give you a hand," said a voice, and, looking up, Fearson saw Evan Hartwick bending over him.

"So shy you?" came thickly from Fearson's lips.

"Well, w'at d'yer think I want help fer? I'm all right. Lemme 'lone!"

Despite his protests, Hartwick helped him to his feet.

As soon as he was upright, Fearson seemed to recover in a measure, and the language that fell from his lips would not look well here. A look of satisfaction came to Hartwick's face, as he heard the man cursing the lad who had thrown him down.

"I know that fellow," declared Hartwick, in a manner that attracted the trainer's attention and caused him to stop cursing for a moment.

"Well, I don't care if yer do!" snarled Fearson. "He may be a friend o' yours, but I'm goin' ter punch his head jes' ther same!"

"He is no friend of mine," declared Evan, in a guarded voice. "He is an enemy, and I hate him more than I hate any other person on the face of the earth!"

"Well, I'm goin' ter kick ther stuffin' outer him! Come erlong, an' you'll see some fun."

"Wait a minute, Fearson; I want to tell you something. You are in no condition to tackle him now."

"Why not?"

"You're half shot."

"No such thing—hic! I'm all right. He's nothing but a kid. I could lick him 'fi had twict ther load."

"That's where you make a mistake. He's a scraper."

"Don't care; he's a boy. I can lick a boy."

"He is more of a man than you think. And I tell you that you had better go slow. Take my warning."

Fearson flung Hartwick off in a savage manner.

"Git out!" he snarled. "I know my business!"

"All right," said Evan; "go ahead. You will know more after you are through with Frank Merriwell. Then you may come to me, and I'll have a talk with you."

Fearson rolled away toward the dressing-tent.

In the meantime, Frank had boldly carried Little Lotta into the tent, paying no attention to the performers who were dressing for the show. Lotta guided him to a corner, where a shabby curtain was hung, making a little alcove, in which there could be a pretense of secrecy.

"This is where I dress," she explained, as she sat down on a box just outside the curtain, and leaned

against a pile of trappings, still looking pale, but with a suggestion of color returning slowly to her cheeks. "Mlle. Fatima dresses here, too."

"Who is Mlle. Fatima?" asked Frank, by way of saying something.

"She says she is my mother," answered the girl, slowly.

"And your father?"

"He's dead."

"How about Fearson? What is he to you?"

"Fatima says he is my uncle."

"How long have you been with a circus?"

"Ever since I can remember."

"Do you like it?"

"Sometimes I do. I like to hear the applause and see the people waving their hands and handkerchiefs; but I have to work so hard all the time, and it never seems that I am rested. Oh, I'd give so much to go away off somewhere where there are no circuses and just do nothing but rest, rest, rest!"

Frank's heart was touched, and his heart went out to the pretty child whose life was so hard, and who longed so much for rest.

"Don't you get rest in the winter time?"

"Oh, no!"

"But the circus does not run right along through the winter?"

"Sometimes it does. One winter we traveled all the time in the South, but down there, in some of the States, circuses have to pay such big licenses that they stay away."

"What do you do when the circus is not traveling?"

"Work—practice every day learning new feats. And then I get scolded and hit and whipped and kept hungry when I fail. Oh, I tell you it is not easy!"

Frank flushed.

"Whipped and kept hungry!" he muttered. "Who dares treat you in such an inhuman manner?"

"Fatima."

"Your mother?"

"The one who says she is my mother."

"Who says so! Then—then you think she is not your mother?"

"It doesn't seem that she can be my really and truly mother," said the child, in a low tone. "Sometimes

I dream of a really and truly mother, and she is not at all like Fatima—her face is so different. The mother I see in my dreams has such a sweet, good face, and she smiles on me so tenderly! I know that face so well, and I love it so much! It is white and beautiful, but there is something sad about it, as if she were sorry for me. That face bends over me, and the lips touch my hair and my cheek, and, oh! that touch is so much like heaven! Sometimes I dream that I put my arms about her neck, and that her arms are about me, and I beg her not to let me go, but to keep me with her forever and ever and ever. Then she kisses me again, and she tells me I shall come to her some time. And that—that makes me know she is my really and truly mother. It does not seem that it is all a dream, but sometimes I think that I have really known that face, and then it is like a memory of one who has lived and held her arms about me and touched my hair and my eyes with her kisses.”

The child stopped speaking, her chin all a-quiver, her eyes filled with tears, and a deep look of longing on her face.

Frank Merriwell felt his heart swelling within him,

and he longed to rescue the girl from the wretched life she was leading.

"Lotta," he softly said, as he dropped on one knee beside her, "I believe you are right. I do not think Fatima is your truly mother, and I——"

"What's that?" cried a harsh voice. "What are you telling the child? What business have you in here, anyhow? Git out, before some of the men break your neck!"

Frank leaped to his feet and turned to find Mlle. Fatima at hand. She was glaring at him in a furious manner, her painted lips drawn back from her teeth, and her hands clinched. At that moment she looked like a crouching panther that was about to spring.

CHAPTER XV.

FEARSON FINDS A MASTER.

Little Lotta uttered a cry of alarm, and her face became pale with fear, while she shrank away.

Frank arose quickly, and turned to face the woman. He was about to speak, when Tom Fearson came rushing into the tent.

"Here, Tom—here!" cried Fatima, pointing to Frank. "Throw this meddling young wretch out!"

"That's w'at I will!" snarled the elephant trainer; "an' I'll break his face before I throw him out!"

Frank immediately realized that he was in for trouble, and he prepared to meet Fearson.

For the first time the other men in the tent began to pay some attention to the young fellow who had entered with Lotta. Had he come in alone, he would have been run out in a hurry, but the child was his passport, and nothing had been said to him.

Fearson tore off his coat and thrust back the sleeves

of his red shirt, as he advanced upon Frank. His face was flushed, but his step was not unsteady.

"Git out ther way, Mag!" he growled, as he caught the woman by the arm, and whirled her aside. "I want plenty o' room ter scatter that young fool all over ther tent."

"Run!" cried Little Lotta, getting hold of Frank's hand—"run, or he will kill you!"

But the youth did not seem at all afraid of Tom Fearson. Instead of running, he faced the elephant trainer coolly, and said:

"If you know when you are well off, you will let me alone. As sure as you try to lay a hand on me, I'll close both of your eyes!"

"W'ats that?" howled the man, in astonishment. "Do I hear straight? You—you close my eyes?"

"That is what I said."

Fearson laughed hoarsely.

"Ho! ho! ho! Why, you won't have time ter ketch yer breath arter I git my paws onter yer!"

"Oh, he will kill you!" again exclaimed the child.

"Don't be afraid," said Frank, quietly. "That will not be such an easy task as he thinks."

"Go for him, Tom!" shrilly cried the woman, eager to witness the punishment of the youth.

Then Fearson rushed at Frank, trying to grasp him.

With the utmost ease, the young athlete avoided the awkward man, slipped under his arm, at the same time giving Fearson a dig in the ribs that brought a grunt of pain and astonishment from the elephant trainer's lips.

Fearson snarled as he turned awkwardly, and then, without delay, made another rush at Frank.

Pud—crack! One was a body blow, and the other landed on the man's left eye, nearly knocking him down, and completely dazing him for a moment.

As Fearson stood there, with a hand pressed over his eye, Frank could have finished him; but, feeling that the man had been drinking, Merriwell was ashamed to strike him again.

The performers and tentmen gathered about, amazement expressed on their faces.

"He's only a boy!" exclaimed one. "How did he do it?"

"If he'd known Fearson, he'd never dared," declared another.

"Fearson will beat the breath of life out of the strip-ling's body before the affair is over," said a third.

"We'll have to look out that he doesn't kill the boy," another put in.

This caused Frank to smile.

"Gentlemen," he said, "you need not be alarmed. Mr. Fearson will not harm me in the least."

"Hey!" roared the trainer, dropping his hand. "I'll tear yer heart out, that's what I will!"

Then he again made a charge for Merriwell.

The very fact that he had met such a reception at the hands of the youth was enough to make the man wild with rage. He gnashed his teeth, and his eyes glared, while he tried to beat down the lad with his heavy fists.

Frank parried the blows, and stopped the rush with a terrible jolt that landed on Fearson's chin. Then the boy nailed the trainer in the right eye, sending him reeling backward. Exclamations of astonishment broke from the witnesses.

"He's a scrapper!" cried one. "I'll bet my dough on the youngster! A 'V' even that he licks Fearson! Who takes it?"

There was no taker.

The trainer heard the words, and they stung him like the cut of a whip. He had been the bully of the circus. Was it possible he was to be overthrown and humiliated by a mere boy?

Almost frothing at the mouth, he made a third attempt to get at Frank Merriwell, who was calmly waiting to receive him.

This time Fearson was more cautious. He brushed his hand across his eyes, realizing that they were beginning to swell already, and remembered Frank's promise to close them.

"I'll finish him before they go out on me," muttered the man, as he tried to force the fighting.

But he was unable to force it much, for Frank was nimble on his feet, and he would come in and give his foe two or three cracks, and then get away without receiving a blow in return.

The witnesses began to realize that the youth, for all of his years, was a thoroughly scientific fighter, and was getting the best of Fearson, who employed nothing but brute force.

At last, Frank determined to end the fight as quickly as possible, realizing Fearson would not give up till he

was quite knocked out. Then he went after the elephant trainer in a manner that quite took away the man's breath.

Frank gave Fearson a genuine prize-fighter's thump under the heart, and cracked him on the jaw with the other fist, sending the man to the ground in a quivering heap.

With a scream of fury, Fatima rushed at the youth, trying to clutch him with her fingers, an expression of the most malignant hatred on her face.

Fortunately, that scream warned the lad, and he managed to avoid her. She was grasped by several of the circus men, one of whom said to Frank:

"Take my advice and skip out. You have licked Fearson, and licked him fairly; but he is revengeful, and he will not let the matter drop. He will be furious enough to shoot you, when he comes around and finds out what has happened."

Frank stooped beside Little Lotta, and softly said:

"I am going now, but I'll try to see you again. Do not forget me, dear. Remember me as your friend."

"I'll never forget you," she whispered. "Oh, you are so handsome—so brave—so good! Never—never

before have I seen one like you! No, no! I'll not forget you! But look out for Fearson. Good-by."

"Good-by!"

Then Frank left the tent.

Merriwell felt very well satisfied over what he had done, for he believed Tom Fearson was a brutal fellow who deserved the thrashing he had received.

Fearson had seemed to take delight in torturing Napoleon, the elephant, and this had opened Merriwell's eyes to the man's true nature.

Frank had heard that, at times, it was an absolute necessity to use hot iron on "rogue" elephants in order to conquer them; but it was because Fearson seemed to rejoice in an opportunity to burn Napoleon that the boy had been so disgusted with him.

When the man displayed his drunken brutality toward Little Lotta it was more than Merriwell could endure and remain inactive.

The words of the child as she told him of her dreams of a mother she could not remember had awakened in Frank's heart a feeling of intense pity and a desire to take her far away from the soul-dwarfing life she had been compelled to lead.

"If I could do that," thought the boy, "it would give me the greatest satisfaction. Is there no way?"

He pondered over the question.

The crowd about the tents had grown denser, and the voice of the man in front of the side-show was louder and more blatant than ever, as he temptingly described the attractions to be seen within.

The crowd was densely packed about the balloon, which seemed to be straining and struggling with the ropes that held it to the ground, as if eager to soar away.

As Frank looked, he saw a man in tights and spangled trunks entering the basket of the balloon.

"The ascension is about to take place," muttered Merriwell, as he hastened toward the spot.

Of a sudden, his attention was attracted by the sounds of blows, and then came shrill cries in Toots' familiar voice.

"G'way, dar, yo' mean white raskel!" screamed the colored lad. "What yo' doun', boy? Marser Frank will bre'k ebry bone in yo' body when he hear ob dis!"

Frank hurried forward, and, in a moment, came

upon a sight that filled him with astonishment and unutterable anger.

On the ground lay two battered and broken bicycles, and beside them was a sledge-hammer, which had been dropped from the hands of the one who had ruined the machines with a few fierce blows.

The person who had worked this ruin was Rolf Harlow, who had turned to hurry from the locality.

In this manner Harlow had sought to get square with Merriwell for exposing his crooked shell game.

Snap!—Frank's teeth came together. Then, with his eyes flaming, he made a rush for Harlow.

It happened that Rolf saw Frank coming, and the look on Merriwell's face turned the cowardly fellow's blood cold in his veins. He realized that he would be severely handled if Merriwell succeeded in getting hold of him.

Wildly Rolf looked around for some means of escape.

At that very moment men were casting off the last rope that held the balloon to the ground.

Like a flash Harlow made up his mind, and he rushed for the balloon, with Frank in hot pursuit.

Rolf grasped the edge of the basket to clamber into it, and then the rope was cast off.

Like a bird, the released balloon shot into the air, carrying the clinging lad beyond Frank's grasp.

Frank barely missed Rolf's feet, but he realized that his enemy had escaped, and he saw the man in the car get hold of the boy's hands and drag him over the side.

The crowd sent up a roar that was half a cheer, and the aeronaut gracefully waved his hand, as the balloon bore man and boy away.

Harlow bent over the side of the basket, his face white but triumphant, and shook his fist in Merriwell's direction.

Frank was disgusted.

"It's lucky for you that you found such a means of escaping!" he muttered, as he turned to see how much damage had been done to the bicycles.

Toots was standing beside the broken wheels, in an attitude of grief and despair. He wrung his hands as he saw Frank approach.

"Oh, Marsen Frank!" sobbed the colored boy; "I nebber step no mo' dan ten foot erway! I jes' step

off a li'l' bit to see de balloon go up, an' den dat low-down, no 'count white trash come an' bre'k de bisuckles!"

With his hands on his hips, Frank surveyed the broken wheels. He saw that they were ruined.

"Well, this means that we'll have to purchase two more wheels," he said, paying very little heed to Toots.

"I'll wo'k teh pay fo' um, Marser Frank," said the colored boy, quickly. "It wur all mah fault. I neber dream anybody would do a t'ing teh dem bisuckles while de balloon was goin' up."

"Well, Harlow didn't do a thing to them!" exclaimed Frank, grimly. "But he had better have a care that he doesn't get battered up like these wheels."

At this moment Browning, Diamond and Rattleton, who had been "taking in the sights," approached. When they saw what had happened and heard Frank's story, they were wild with rage.

But Harlow was far beyond their reach, and all they could do was stand and watch the balloon till it drifted far away, becoming a mere speck in the distance.

"What'll we do, Frank?" asked Rattleton. "Is this

going to knock us out and trip our spoil—I mean spoil our trip?”

“Not much,” came from Merriwell’s lips. “This town should have a bicycle agency; it is large enough. We may be able to obtain wheels here. If not, I am sure we can find anything we want in Kansas City. Two of our wheels are ruined, but the others are all right. Without a doubt, Harlow intended to smash them all, but he was not given time to finish the dirty job. He chose a fine time for the job, just when everybody’s attention was attracted by the balloon ascension that was to take place in a moment.”

“If we are not able to procure wheels here, two of us will have to travel by rail to Kansas City,” said Diamond.

“That is right.”

“Then I suppose Browning is one who will be sure to make the trip by rail,” Harry observed.

Then, to the surprise of all, Bruce said:

“Not on your life, children! I set out to ride across the continent on a wheel, and I propose to ride it. When I get back to Yale, the fellows will be trying to jolly me about making a bicycle trip in a passenger

coach, and I want to tell them I did not ride that way, and tell the truth. If one of those broken wheels belongs to me, I am going to camp right here in this town till I get fitted out with another. That's what's the matter with little Brucie."

"Good boy!" cried Frank, with satisfaction. "You have the right sort of stuff in you, old man! They call you the laziest man at Yale, but there are others."

"Thanks," drawled the big fellow. "I haven't any small change."

Frank proposed that they take the uninjured wheels back to the hotel, where they could be locked up till they were needed.

This was done, and the bicycles were stored in a room where the landlord declared they would be safe from harm.

Then Frank told the boys of his adventure in the dressing-tent, and of his encounter with Fearson.

"By jingoes!" cried Rattleton. "We tried to get into the tent, but they would not admit us. We'd come in anyway, if we'd known you were in that kind of a scrape."

"You bet we would!" nodded the young Virginian.

"Jes' yo' stay wif us, Marser Frank," advised Toots. "If yo' don't yo' enemies am gwine teh cotch yeh suah."

"One of them is not likely to trouble me again for some hours," smiled Merriwell. "Harlow is far away by this time. And I rather fancy Hartwick will keep away. As for Fearson, I do not fancy his eyes are in condition to see me very well."

"Isn't it rather remarkable that Hartwick and Harlow should be together out here?" asked Browning.

"Oh, I don't know. Harlow is a gambler, and this circus must have enabled him to snare a great many suckers. As for Hartwick—well, he's out of college, and he must do something for a living, so he has cast his fortunes in with those of Harlow. It is plain that they are standing together, and whacking up on the boodle."

The boys left the hotel and returned to the circus ground, where they found the ticket wagon was open, and the ticket-seller was making change, as he sold tickets, with marvelous rapidity. Inside the tent the band was banging away, and a great crowd was pouring in at the entrance.

The boys purchased tickets, and entered the tent.

CHAPTER XVI.

EVENTS AT THE CIRCUS.

"The Monster Menagerie of Wild and Savage Beasts from All Parts of the Globe" was to be seen in the first tent entered by the boys. As they walked in, they each were handed a small bill by a boy who was stationed near the entrance. The small bills announced a "Grand Performance" to be given in the main tent after the regular programme.

As they were looking at the animals, Frank suddenly uttered a sharp exclamation, and then said:

"Well, this thing is getting rather monotonous, to say the least!"

"What is it?" asked Diamond, with immediate interest.

"Take a look at this," invited Merriwell, handing him the bill.

On the margin was some writing, and Jack read:

"This is the third warning, Frank Merriwell, and you had better heed it. You have made a desperate

enemy of Fearson, and Hartwick has made a compact with the elephant trainer to do you up. You may not escape with your life from this tent unless you go at once.

A FRIEND."

"Well, say!" said Jack, "certainly this is getting tiresome! What are you going to do about it?"

"See the boy who gave me this bill."

Back to the boy at the entrance went Frank, followed by the others, but not the least satisfaction could he get out of the youth, who positively declared that he knew nothing of the writing on the margin of the small bill, and could not explain how it came there. He said he simply had given Frank a bill, the same as the others who came in, and had seen no writing upon it."

"It is plain that he won't tell," said Frank, in disgust, as he turned away, "and that settles it."

"What are you going to do?" asked Jack.

"Nothing."

"You will pay no attention to the warning?"

"Certainly not."

"You had better peep your eyes keeled—I mean keep your eyes peeled," said Rattleton, hurriedly. "It is pretty certain that your enemies are active, and it would

not surprise me to learn that it is true that Hartwick has hired Fearson to kill you. I do not believe Evan Hartwick would hesitate at that, though he might not have the nerve to try the job himself."

"You do not seem to have a very good opinion of Hartwick," smiled Frank.

"Good opinion of him!" snorted Harry. "Why, he is the biggest scoundrel I ever knew in all my life!"

"He is quite a ruffian," acknowledged Merriwell. "I have had other enemies, but I think Hartwick the meanest of them all. Beside him, Roland Ditson, who was almost the first to try to do me dirt when I entered Yale, seems like a puppy dog."

"Did you ever notice that Evan Hartwick and Fred Flemming, who became your enemy after you were rivals for a position on the 'varsity eight, are very much alike in looks and disposition?" asked Diamond.

"Yes, I have noticed it," nodded Frank; "but I do not think Flemming would carry his hatred quite as far as Hartwick."

"I don't know about that. He is a reckless fellow."

"That is true, but it seems to me that Hartwick, in an intense fit of fury, might not hesitate at the greatest

of crimes, while Flemming would not go beyond a certain limit."

"You may be right, but I fancy Flemming sets that limit pretty high. It is almost a dead sure thing that he hired the ruffians to kidnap you, in order to keep you from running at the Madison Square Garden tournament, Frank."

"Yes, I believe Flemming was at the bottom of that job, but he made a fizzle of it; and it may be that he will drop the fight when I get back to college."

"Don't fool yourself in that way," drawled Browning. "Mr. Flemming will be on hand, and he'll continue to be your enemy."

"He should take warning by what befell Hartwick. If he wishes to remain at Yale, he'd better go slow."

At last, they came to the elephant. Poor Napoleon was standing behind his rope, slowly and monotonously swinging his trunk, while he swayed from side to side in a manner that indicated he was still in great pain from the burns he had received some hours before.

"It seems a shame to treat any sort of a beast in such a manner," said Harry. "I wonder that he should become so docile after being burned that way."

"It is rather singular," said Jack.

"Dat elumfunt ain't so docile as he might be, chil-luns," declared Toots, as he remained at a distance. "Jes' yo' tek a look at his odder eye. Land ob water-millions! but de berry ole debbil am in dat eye, suah's yeh bawn!"

"He has a bad look in his eyes," nodded Frank. "They say elephants never forget, and I do not believe he will forget the treatment he has received this day."

"Don' yeh get too neah dat elumfunt, Marser Frank," warned Toots. "He's gwan teh use somebody rough befo' long, an' he might tek eh noshun teh swat yo' with dat tail he kerries on der front end ob him."

At this moment, having seen the boys near the ropes, Tom Fearson came forward. His face showed that he had "been up against something hard," for both his eyes were nearly "buttoned up." Seeing Frank, he caught up a bar of iron, such as had been used to burn the elephant, and started for the lad he hated.

Napoleon saw Fearson catch up that iron, and it is certain that the great beast fancied it was to be tortured once more. Quick as a flash, the elephant sent its trunk coiling around Fearson.

Then came a shout of terror from the trainer's lips—a shout that electrified those who heard it. The man dropped the iron bar, as he was swung aloft by the elephant's trunk.

Then Fearson was dashed to the ground with terrific force, and he lay there stunned, unable to get away.

Slowly, and with murderous intent, the elephant reared its great form, lifting its forward feet from the ground.

Frank realized that the creature intended to bring those feet down upon the helpless man, which would crush the life out of Fearson's body in an instant.

It seemed that Frank moved with the quickness of thought itself. Under the rope he plunged, caught the trainer by the collar, and dragged him away.

Just in time. Down came the elephant's feet, missing the intended victim by a narrow margin.

Then men rushed forward and forced Napoleon back, while Frank carried the trainer still farther from the dangerous point, taking him beyond the elephant's sight.

Some of the circus hands aided Merriwell to take

Fearson into the dressing-tent, and there the man was stretched on a blanket that was spread on the ground.

The trainer was conscious, and his half-closed eyes seemed to be turned toward the boy who had saved his life. His lips moved, but nothing save an inarticulate mumbling sound came from them. That mumbling sounded like a curse.

"He is not grateful because you saved his life, Merry," said Diamond, who, with the other boys, had followed Frank into the tent.

"It makes no difference," said Merriwell, quietly. "He is a human being, and I would do it again, under the same circumstances."

It seemed that a queer look passed over Fearson's bruised face, but this time he did not mumble.

Not a few of the men about showed a sort of satisfaction over the fate that had befallen the trainer. They had disliked him, some had hated him, nearly all had feared him.

A doctor was sent for, and Fearson was left lying on his blanket—alone.

Having seen the trainer carried into the dressing-tent, the boys returned to the big tent. There the ex-

citement caused by the catastrophe had calmed down somewhat.

It was announced that the performance in the "great ring" was about to begin, and they hastened to secure seats.

Then came the grand parade of all the performers. It was "grand" in name only, and was similar to nearly all such parades, with which most traveling circuses open their performances.

After the parade there was some bareback riding of a decidedly inferior order, but it seemed to satisfy the audience.

Two clowns came out and perpetrated the same moldy gags that clowns have persisted in inflicting on a long-suffering and inoffensive public for the last fifty years or more.

Men and women jumped through paper-covered hoops, horses jumped five-barred gates, which were held at such a slant that a tired tortoise might have made a bluff at jumping them, and everybody cried hoop-la! and pretended it was very marvelous and astonishing.

The same little jackass came out and capered around the ring, and the ringmaster offered the same old hundred dollars to any man who would ride the jackass, and the same fake countryman came lumbering over the circle of dirt and fell onto the sawdust, after which he went through the same chestnuttty business of trying to ride and being thrown off, till he lay down on the little animal's back, locking his legs about its neck and his arms about its body, with his head toward its tail, in which manner he rode around the ring with the same success as usual.

"Well, say!" laughed Frank, "it is the old game from start to finish. Toots seems to find it funny."

The colored boy was roaring with laughter, clinging to his sides, and rocking forward and backward.

"Gracious sakes to goodness!" gasped Toots. "I nebber seen nuffin' lek dat! Shoo fly, chilluns! Wha's de matter wid yo'? Yo' don' seem happy at all."

After a time, Prof. Wallace, Fatima and Little Lotta were announced, in their marvelous and astounding aerial feats on the flying trapeze.

Frank caught his breath.

"I don't feel like staying to see this," he declared.

"I am afraid it will be too much for my nerves."

But he remained, although his face was very pale when the man and woman, dressed in fleshings, came running into the ring, with the little girl between them.

CHAPTER XVII.

LITTLE LOTTA'S LAST APPEARANCE.

The trapeze performers received a round of applause, which caused them to bow and kiss their hands, Little Lotta doing so in a manner that made Frank think her heart was filled with pain, although she had forced a smile to her face.

"It's a shame!" muttered Merriwell, clinching his hands. "Such a thing should not be allowed!"

"Right," nodded Diamond. "She should be attending school, instead of doing such business as this."

"I do not believe she is in condition to perform to-day," said Frank. "I think she still feels the injury she received when she slid down the wire, and I'll wager anything she has been forced into this against her will."

"Dat am what I call a scand'lus shame," put in Toots.

Mlle. Fatima was first drawn up to the swinging bar,

and then the child followed, while "the professor" came last.

Then they began to give their part of the exhibition, which was far superior in merit to that which had preceded. Some of their feats were first class, and Frank held his breath as he saw Little Lotta tossed about in the air as if the distance to the ground were but a few inches.

"Some time she'll fall, and that will finish her," whispered Harry Rattleton. "Why don't they have a net below them?"

"They should have," said Frank. "It is rank carelessness to do their act in this manner. There are some men down there, but the chances are they would not break the child's fall if she came down. She'd strike the ground before—— Oh!"

There was a shriek, a small body shooting through the air, and a shuddering gasp of horror from the spell-bound spectators. It was all over in a moment.

Little Lotta had fallen.

She had been partly caught by one of the men below, but he had not caught her fairly, and she lay in a quiet heap of pink upon the ground.

Women shrieked and covered their eyes, while men groaned and cursed. The great crowd was horror-stricken.

Frank seemed to move quicker than the circus hands themselves. Down from his seat he leaped, and over into the ring he went. He stooped and gathered the child in his arms, his face even whiter than the face that was framed by those yellow curls. Her eyes were open, and she saw him—recognized him.

"It's come at last!" she whispered. "I am going to meet her now—the dear, dear mother of whom I dreamed so often! I saw her face as I fell, and I heard her call me! I'll not be tired any more, for I shall rest in her arms."

Tears blinded Frank's eyes, and his heart arose in his throat and choked him.

"No, no, Little Lotta!" he panted. "You shall not die, if doctors can save you! You shall have the best of attendance, no matter what it costs!"

"I don't want to live, dear friend," she faintly returned. "I do not care to live and continue the old life. It is too hard and cruel. I'd rather die, and go to my dear mother who loves me so."

"If you live, you shall not continue the old life! I swear it! I will find a way to take you from it!"

Then a rough man grasped him by the shoulder, and other men tried to take the little girl from him; but she let her arms slip around his neck, and entreated:

"Do not let me go, dear friend! Hold me tight!"

"Lead the way," said Frank to the men. "I will follow."

And, rather than produce a scene, they permitted him to bear her from the great tent into the dressing-tent.

Fortunately, the doctor who had attended Tom Fearson was still on hand, and he made a hasty examination of the child's injuries.

"Left leg and two ribs broken," he said. "She may be injured internally. Doubtful if she'll ever perform again."

Prof. Wallace and Fatima heard the words. The man cursed like a pirate, while the woman snarled:

"The little fool! Why should she fall like that, and take the bread and butter out of our mouths!"

"Brutes!" muttered Frank Merriwell.

Then he gave directions that the girl be taken to the best hotel in town, and given the very best room.

"You'll have to pay the bills," sneered Prof. Wallace. "You needn't think we're going to foot the bills for any such luxuries for the little brat!"

Frank's anger flamed forth.

"Don't you worry about that, sir!" he cried. "I will pay the bills. As for you and this woman with you, you should be in the penitentiary for causing the child's injuries and possible death!"

Lotta was removed to the hotel, and Frank soon had all three of the physicians in the place at work over her. While he was waiting outside the room to learn of their success, he was astonished to see a lad whom he knew suddenly appear before him.

It was Tom Thornton, a Yale student who had been Frank's enemy in other days, although he had given his promise to trouble Merriwell no more.

"Hello!" cried Merry, showing his surprise. "You, too? Then three of my old enemies are here, instead of two."

"I acknowledge that I was your enemy once," said Thornton; "but I have tried to befriend you of late. I warned you of a plot against you in New York, al-

though you took no stock in it, and I have warned you several times since you struck this place."

"Then you are the unknown 'Friend' who has been sending me warnings? Well, this is a surprise!"

"Yes, I have sent you the warnings, and I rather fancy you found they were true."

"But why did you keep out of sight in such a manner?"

"Because you did not believe me when you heard my warning in New York, and you said you would not trust me. I thought you would not trust me now, if you knew I sent the warnings."

"But how do you happen to be out here, anyway?"

"I am traveling with the circus during vacation, the same as Hartwick and Harlow."

"Well, what do you want of me now?"

"Tom Fearson begged me to come and tell you he wanted to see you. Fearson thinks he is going to die."

Frank hesitated. The thought came to him that it might be a trick, but that simply spurred him to go.

"Lead on," he said. "If this is some sort of crooked game, look out for yourself, that is all!"

Thornton was evidently hurt.

"That shows you do not trust me even now!" he cried. "Well, I have done everything in my power to prove to you that I am your friend."

Frank followed Tom back to the dressing-tent of the circus. On the way, Thornton told Merriwell that the balloonist and Rolf Harlow had been heard from by telegraph, having reached a nearby town. In descending, they had met with some thrilling experiences, and Harlow had been so severely injured that he would be confined to a bed for two weeks, at least.

On hearing this Merriwell displayed not a sign of triumph. He did not gloat over the misfortunes of an enemy.

Reaching the dressing-tent, Frank found Fearson stretched on the blanket, and it was plain that he was in great pain. Frank stooped beside the blanket, and spoke to the trainer.

"Is it you?" muttered Fearson, thickly, as he opened his eyes. "I didn't know as ye'd come, but I wanted ter see yer. They say I'm liable ter die, an' I want ter ask yer forgiveness. I was drunk, an' I've got a bad temper anyway. Will yer fergive me, youngster?"

"I will, my poor fellow!" said Merriwell. "I am

sure that you have been punished more than you deserve."

"I dunno 'bout that. I was mad enough ter kill ye, and that chap Hartwick said he'd give me five hundred dollars if I'd do it. I wanted ter tell ye ter look out fer him."

"Oh, I'll do that!"

"I've seen him sence I was hurt, an' I tole him I'd lick ther stuffin' out of him if I ever got well. I ruther think he's left the circus a'ready. An' ye're sure ye fergive me, boy?"

"Yes, I forgive you freely."

"Then let me touch yer hand. You're white, an' you're all right. I feel better now. Dunno but I'll try ter git well."

Little Lotta did not die, although she was injured so severely that she was confined to a bed of pain for a long time, and the circus went on without her.

Frank saw that the child should have the very best of care, having obtained as nurse for her a widow, who had lost a little girl of her own.

During Lotta's illness the widow became so attached to the child that she wished to adopt her, and legal ar-

rangements to that effect were finally completed. The little waif had at last found a good home.

Lotta clung to Frank, when he was bidding her good-by, the time having come for him to resume his journey across the continent.

"I'm going to try to get well because you want me to, dear friend," she said. "Only I don't want to go back to the old life again."

"You shall not go back, Little Lotta," promised Merriwell. "They have abandoned you here, and I'll take care that they do not trouble you again."

"And must you leave me so soon?"

"Yes, dear, I must go now; but I promise that I'll stop and see you on my way back East. After that—well, who knows? we may see more of each other than you think possible now."

"You are so good!" sobbed the child, drawing him down and kissing him, while she smiled through her tears. "You are the goodest fellow I ever knew. I didn't suppose there could be anybody so good in all the world! And I am happy!"

"I am glad you are happy," said Frank; and then he and the little girl parted.

A day later the bicycle boys left that town and continued their journey westward.

Harry was anxious to see some of the prairie lands of Kansas, and so they turned from Missouri into the State mentioned.

For several days nothing out of the ordinary happened and they made good progress toward the end of the tour.

At a village called Melton they heard of some cattle thieves, but gave the matter no attention. The "rustlers," as they were called, had been in that neighborhood, but were now gone.

On the day after leaving Melton they struck fairly and squarely across the rich prairies.

Frank was soon in advance, and a spurt of speed took him out of sight of his chums.

And it was then that he ran up against an adventure as odd as any that had gone before.

CHAPTER XVIII.

TESS.

"Look out thar, tenderfoot!"

The cry was uttered in a clear, strong girlish voice.

Frank did not need the warning, for already was he aware of his danger, having seen the "long-horn" break from the herd of cattle and come charging toward him.

Quickly Frank turned his wheel and started to pedal away, but, rapid though his movements were, the enraged steer was right upon him before he was fairly started in flight.

Besides the sound of the steer's hoofs, there came another sound, as of a galloping horse, and the boy's side-long backward glance showed him a girl, mounted on a chunky, ewe-necked bronco, riding straight at the steer, and swinging a lasso about her head.

It did not seem possible to Frank Merriwell that the girl could succeed in stopping the steer, and then it was that he longed for some weapon with which he could bring the animal down.

There was fire in the glaring eyes of the maddened "long-horn," and the creature seemed coming with the speed of the wind.

Frank caught his breath, expecting to be sent flying from the saddle of his bicycle, tossed in the air, dropped in a senseless heap to the ground, perhaps trodden and cut by those cleft hoofs.

The clear eye of the girl on the bronco were fastened on the steer, and there was a look of resolution on her sun-tanned, wind-kissed face.

With the skill of a veteran cowboy, the girl sent the noose flying through the air, and it dropped over the horns of the steer.

In a moment the bronco, well trained to its work, wheeled and braced itself for the shock.

Not a moment too soon was the steer roped, for its horns almost touched Frank's sleeve before the lariat came taut with a twang like a bowstring.

In a twinkling the steer was flung to the ground, and the shock of its fall told the flying boy that his peril was over for the moment.

He turned to the left, and swung around so he could see what was taking place.

He saw the girl leap from the saddle with a swish of short skirts, bound like a fawn to the side of the steer, and throw off the noose with a deft movement.

And then, before the partly-stunned and wholly-bewildered animal could regain its feet, she was back in the saddle, which she regained with a quickness and ease that fairly took away the breath of the watching boy.

"What are yer doin', tenderfoot?" she cried, as she saw Frank had turned his wheel about. "If yer knows when yer head's level, ye'll shove that bike o' yourn fer tall timber about as fast as your legs kin make ther old machine travel! It's mighty dangerous fer any galoot who don't know better than to come rarin' round a herd of cattle on one o' them things."

She was decidedly pretty in a wild sort of way, being dressed in a suit of buckskin, with fringe trimmings, and wearing a short skirt and jacket, while on her head was a wide-brimmed Mexican hat. A leather holster, containing a revolver, was strapped to her waist. Her hair and eyes were dark, while her lips were red, and there was a chic, piquant, saucy look about her face.

Frank was attracted by the girl's rather bewitching

appearance, and was surprised by the dexterity she had displayed in casting the lariat and throwing the steer.

In a moment the girl reined her bronco toward the young bicyclist, having drawn in and coiled the rope with a swiftness and skill that was little short of astonishing.

She dashed to Frank's side, giving him a strange look, in which he fancied there was something of pity and contempt.

"However did yer come ter be chasin' round a herd o' long-horns on that bike?" she asked. "It 'pears ter me as how you oughter knowed better'n ter come foolin' round a bunch o' Kansas steers in such a way. Whar's yer sense?"

Frank laughed.

"From your very plain words and manner, it is evident that you fancy I have no sense," he said.

"Wa-al, I won't allow ye've got any ter give erway, You'll need it all, ef yer travels round this yar country on a bike much, an' that's a fact."

"Thank you, miss. But I assure you I am not afraid of being tossed by a long-horn if I have a fair start and a clear field. The steer would have done the trick but

for you, I freely confess; but it was because I was taken by surprise, as it broke away from the herd and came at me without warning."

The girl's red lips curled in a smile of derision.

"Go on!" she cried. "It's plain you don't know much about long-horns. They're blamed cantankerous critters when they git started, an' they kin run like a streak o' greased wind."

"And you think I could not ride fast enough to keep out of the way of one of them?"

"That's whatever."

"Well," smiled the boy, "you may be right, but I am able to push this wheel at a comfortable rate of speed."

"I rather reckon you think a Kansas steer runs about as fast as an Eastern cow. Wa-al, they kin cover ground a little faster—just a little!"

Then Frank laughed outright.

"Really," he said, "it is plain that you take me for the tenderest sort of a tenderfoot. All right; I'm not kicking. Let it go at that. You saved my life, I think, and I want to thank you for it."

"Oh, that wuz nothin'."

"I don't know as I consider that complimentary, but

never mind. I suppose the life of a tenderfoot isn't considered of much value out here."

"Wa-al, it depends. Thar's Blake, he wuz a tenderfoot when he struck ther ranch, an' now he's about as good a puncher as paw has."

"Who's Blake?"

"Oh, he's an Eastern galoot, an' all he seemed ter know at first wuz Greek an' Latin, an' that sort o' stuff. He had a right smart education, but education o' that sort don't count in a round-up, none whatever."

"It is barely possible that I might become as good a man as Blake, if I chose to settle down on a ranch and become a cowboy, eh?"

"Ter be honest with yer, tenderfoot, it's a heap doubtful. Ye're too young. Wait till yer kin raise a whisker before ye try ter turn cow-puncher."

Frank laughed again.

"All right," he said; "I will take your advice. I trust you will pardon me if I introduce myself. I am Frank Merriwell, from the East, as you know."

"An' I'm Tess Morgan, o' ther 'MM' Ranch. My paw owns ther 'MM,' an' these cattle hyar belong ter him. Them are his punchers over yander thar," with

a sweep of her hand toward some ranchmen who were patrolling the outskirts of the herd.

"I am very glad to know you, Miss Morgan," said Merriwell, gracefully lifting his cap. "But why are so many cowboys watching this herd?"

"Mebbe it's a round-up."

"This is not the right season for that."

Tess opened her eyes.

"How do you know that?" she asked.

"Well, it is one of the things I happen to know, that's all."

This did not seem to satisfy the girl, and she scowled a bit.

"Ye're right," she admitted. "I dunno's I mind tellin' yer. It's this way: Paw has been troubled by rustlers of late. They've been runnin' off his stock, an' he's been gittin' his critters tergether o' late, ter find out jest how hard he's been hit. That's all."

"That explains it. We are heading for your father's ranch, hoping to find accommodations there for the night."

"We? Who's we?"

"My friends and myself."

"Whar are yer friends?"

"Coming back there. I scorched on ahead of them, having seen the herd and the cowboys, intending to ask the way to the ranch."

The girl looked in the direction indicated by Frank's gesture and far away she saw Frank's friends, the sunlight glinting brightly on the nickel plating of their wheels.

"So thar are five o' yer?" said Tess. "Wa-al, I dunno. Paw never turns anybody erway, an' I reckon he'll keep yer somehow; but yer won't have all ther luxuries o' feather beds an' them things, not by a heap."

"Oh, I think we'll manage to get along, for all of that," said Frank, pleasantly. "We are used to roughing it."

"How fur have yer rid on them bikes?"

"From New York."

"Wh-h-h-at?"

Tess was astonished, as she plainly showed.

"Say!" she cried, her eyes flashing, "whatever d'yer take me fer? Don't try that sort of a bluff on me, Mr. Merriwell!"

"But," said Frank, gravely, "I assure you it is no

bluff. I speak the truth. We are college students, from Yale, and we started from City Hall, New York, to ride to City Hall, San Francisco. We have progressed thus far."

"Wa-al, may I be derved!"

It was a rather rough expression, but Frank was willing to make allowances for this girl, who seemed to be a wild flower of the plains. He felt that she had been raised amid rough men, from whose lips she had heard such language, and thus she had fallen into the habit of expressing herself forcibly, without being aware that it was rude and unladylike.

"How fur have yer rid on them bikes?" she asked, "an' how fur have yer rid on ther cars?"

"We have not ridden on the cars at all yet," declared Frank.

She shook her head in a doubtful way, but did not say outright that she did not believe him. She might as well, however, and she saw a flush of color mount to his cheeks, although he said nothing.

At this moment something like a wild yell came to their ears, and, looking up, he saw three cowboys ra-

cing toward the approaching bicyclists as fast as their broncos would carry them.

Tess saw it, and she cried:

“Your friends will be in trouble directly, you bet! Come on, tenderfoot!”

And away she sped in the direction of the cowboys, with Frank flying along behind her.

CHAPTER XIX.

AN ENCOUNTER WITH COWBOYS.

It was a short, wild race, and it brought a revelation to the cattleman's daughter, for she did not run away from Frank Merriwell, as she expected.

Instead of that, Frank forged along at her side, and then took the lead, although he was forced to strain every muscle to do so.

"I'm blamed if that don't beat me!" exclaimed the girl.

Whooping loudly, the three cowboys charged down upon the young cyclists. One of the three, a tall, lank fellow, known as "Hannah," although his real name was Hannibal Jones, took the lead.

The boys saw the cowboys coming, and for some time they hesitated about the move they should make. At last it was plain they grew alarmed and they turned to ride away.

But the punchers were near at hand, and Hannah un-

slung his lasso, whirling it round and round his head, with the plain intention of making a cast.

Toots, the colored boy, was behind the others, and he cast a frightened look over his shoulder, gasping:

"Goodness sakes teh gracious! I's a daid nigger, suah's yeh bawn!"

Then the writhing lariat flew through the air, and the noose fell over the colored boy's shoulders.

In a moment Toots had been snatched from the bicycle, and he struck the ground with a heavy thump that knocked the breath from his body.

Hannah laughed hoarsely, and the other cowboys shouted with wild delight, as if this sort of sport suited them very well.

Then it was that, flying along at full speed, Frank Merriwell dashed straight at the taut lariat, made a slash at it, and cut it in twain with a keen knife held in his hand.

Tess was close behind Frank, and she shouted at the cowboys, who were on the point of attempting to lasso others of the bicyclists, her voice ringing out clear and distinct:

"Hold hard thar, you critters! Don't ye git so free

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with yer ropes! I'll shoot ther corners off ther next galoot as tries it! You hear me warble!"

She whirled in front of them, her eyes flashing, her cheeks flushed, and her dark hair streaming unbound in the wind.

They knew her, and they heard her command. There was no hesitation about obeying, although Hannah muttered something like a curse beneath his breath, as he surveyed his ruined rope.

Toots sat up and looked around, his black face having a sort of ashen color that plainly denoted terror, and his eyes rolling, while his white teeth chattered together.

"Bress mah soul!" he gasped. "Wha'—wha's dis dat's done got me 'roun' de body? Some ol' thing cotch me fo' suah!"

Then he saw Frank was on hand, and it gave him a feeling of relief.

"If dey fool wif dat boy, dey's gwan teh git hurt fo' certun," he said, with the utmost confidence in Merriwell's prowess. "He ain't gwan teh stan' no foolin'."

The cowboys touched their hats to Tess, but Hannah growled:

"Look yar, Miss Morgan; see how that galoot has cut my rope. He's spoiled it, an' I propose ter shoot ther tires o' his old machine full o' holes."

He whipped out a revolver, but, quick as were his movements, Tess was swifter, and the revolver left the holster at her side for her gloved hand.

"Hold hard, I tell yer!" came clear as the note of a bell from her lips, and the muzzle of the weapon fell to a level with the angry cowboy's heart. "I have ther drop on yer, Hannah, an' I'll ventilate yer sure if yer pulls trigger once!"

The cowboy let his hand fall, a shade of pallor coming to his weather-tanned face.

"All right, ef yer says so, miss," he said, sulkily. "I wouldn't hurt ther tenderfoot; but he's spoiled my rope, an' I wuz goin' ter git squar'."

"He did right in cuttin' ther rope," declared the girl. "He done it before me because he reached it first. Ye had no business ter use ther rope ther way yer did."

"But I didn't want ter use my gun, miss," said Hannah, apologetically, "an' looker ther thing I saw—a nigger ridin' a bisuckle! I reckon I hed a right ter rope ther critter!"

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"Ther nigger belongs to Mr. Merriwell's party, an' that wuz why Mr. Merriwell cut ther rope, which he had a perfect right ter do. You wuz ter blame, Hannah, an' so ye'll have ter stan' ther loss o' yer rope. That's all."

The cowboy's eyes fell, and it seemed that he longed to mutter something, but did not dare do so before her. Then he looked up, and gave Frank a glance that distinctly said :

"Never mind, tenderfoot, there's another time coming, and I'll get square with you then."

Tess saw that look, and she understood, for she flashed forth :

"Be careful, Hannah! Ef yer touch him any other time, I shall know of it."

Frank had stopped as soon as possible after cutting the lariat, turned about, and ridden back fearlessly. He heard all that passed between the girl and the angry cowboy.

"Thank you, Miss Morgan," he said; "but if Hannah will give me a fair show, I rather think I am able to take care of myself. I am not armed with a gun,

and so he has the advantage of me, but I shall not run away if he will put aside the weapon."

Hannah gasped for breath, and the other cowboys laughed hoarsely and derisively.

"Why, dern your hide!—beggin' your pardon, Miss Morgan," said Hannah. "I'd break yer clean in two with one hand tied behind me, ef I took a noshun, tenderfoot."

"You think you would," smiled Frank, easily; "but you might fool yourself. The job might not be as easy as it looks."

Browning, Diamond and Rattleton had turned about and come back. They dismounted and stood beside Frank.

"Why, I could lick ther hull gang o' yer, an' not hafe try," declared Hannah. "It w'u'dn't bother me ter do it—none whatever."

"Let him try it!" palpitated Diamond, whose dark face bore a flush of anger. "Just ask him to get down and wade in! We will knock the wind out of him in about three seconds."

"You sing loud, Hannah," said Frank; "but your voice is cracked. If you ever should tackle the job

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you have just mentioned, there wouldn't be enough of you left to wipe out a Winchester with when we were through with you. As far as that goes, I do not need any assistance in dealing with such as you on even terms."

Something like a scornful laugh broke from the ranchman's daughter, and she cried:

"I don't reckon you know much about Hannah, Mr. Merriwell. He has a record as a bad man. Yer wouldn't be a flea-bite fer him."

"Now, don' yeh mek no mistake 'bout dat, miss!" cried Toots. "Yo' is talkin' dat way beca'se yo' don' know Frank Merriwell."

"Shet up, nigger!" ordered one of the men, savagely. "If you dare speak to Miss Morgan again, I'll start a lead mine in yer carcass!"

A shining weapon was pointed in Toots' direction, and the colored boy dropped on his knees, again filled with terror.

"Don' yo' shoot!" he squealed, imploringly. "Don' yo' waste po'dah an' lead on a po' wufless nigger! If yo' does, yo'll be sorry fo' it suah!"

Tess uttered a sharp command, and the cowboy re-

luctantly put up his "gun," giving the colored boy a black scowl.

"Bress mah soul!" mumbled Toots, again getting to his feet. "I's suah teh git damaged if dis keep up! Nebber see no sech white men as dere am out in dis country—nebbber! I's gwan teh git out ob dis lan' jes' ez quick ez de Law'd let me. Dis ain't no place for a brack gemman ob colah."

Hannah seemed reluctant to go away without having further words with Frank, but Tess gave him an order that he did not care to disobey, and so, with apparent dissatisfaction, he turned his pony and rode off, followed by the others.

"The big ruffian!" said Jack, boldly. "He should be taught a lesson! He needs to be taken down a bit."

"But you bet yer boots thar ain't no man as cares ter try ter take Hannah down," declared the girl.

"Well, I pity the nerve of the men out this way!"—cried Diamond.

"That's because ye're a tenderfoot, an' yer don't know what ye're talkin' about," said Tess, sharply, plainly not pleased with the young Virginian's words or manner.

"Perhaps not," admitted Diamond; "but I know that such a fellow as Mr. Hannah would last about three seconds anywhere in the East. He'd get the wind taken out of him so quick that he would be liable to show some respect for a tenderfoot after that."

Frank smiled, for he saw the Virginian was aroused, and he well knew Jack's impulsive disposition.

"Oh, all right!" smiled the cattleman's daughter, rather scornfully. "You are welcome to think that way. Tenderfeet have some queer ideas."

Frank then proceeded to introduce his friends to the girl. They lifted their caps, bowing low to her, and she said:

"If you are on the way to the 'MM,' I rather reckon I'd better go 'long with yer, fer ther punchers might take a noshun ter have some more fun with yer, ef ye wuz alone."

"We shall be delighted with your company, Miss Morgan," bowed Frank. "It is not often we find such a charming guide out this way."

"Waugh!" cried Tess. "That's slosh! Don't give us any o' that, if yer please! I don't like it."

"But I assure you that I am in earnest, Miss Morgan."

Frank was very grave now, and his eyes spoke far more than his lips. Something about him seemed to fascinate her, and she regarded him with far greater interest than at any previous time. After a bit, she turned, with a toss of her saucy head, muttering:

"Blamed ef it ain't too bad he's only a tenderfoot!"

CHAPTER XX.

A HARVARD "MAN."

The "MM" Ranch was so situated that it was not seen till the boys were within a mile of it, as the country was rolling, and the ranch had been built between two swells.

It was a large, low building, with a broad veranda in front. Behind it, a short distance away, were outbuildings and corrals.

As the party approached a man rode out to meet them

It was Miles Morgan, who, as the boys afterward learned, was known throughout Western Kansas as a "cattle king," being one of the most extensive cattle raisers in the State.

He was a large man, plainly dressed, with long-legged horse-hide boots, a wide-brimmed hat, and serviceable, but ill-fitting, clothing. He was roughly bearded, and his hair was long.

Indeed, Morgan looked little like a wealthy man, who

owned thousands of cattle and large numbers of fine horses.

He regarded the young bicyclists searchingly but not unkindly, and, when within comfortable speaking distance, quietly addressed Tess:

"Whatever have you found, Brown Bird?"

The boys afterward learned that "Brown Bird" was his pet name for her.

"A whole menagerie, paw," she laughed, in answer.

"Wheejiz!" gurgled Harry Rattleton. "She's the most complimentary young lady I ever saw!"

"She is rather outspoken," murmured Browning.

"She jes' don' seem teh care a rap fo' a pusson's feelings," put in Toots. "Saiz anything dat pops inteh her haid."

"What are they doing out this way?" asked Miles Morgan, still surveying the boys with curiosity.

"Tryin' ter git theirselves killed by cayvortin' roun' ther range, an' mixin' with steers an' cow-punchers, paw," laughed Tess.

"Well, they won't have much trouble, if that's what they're looking for," returned the cattle raiser.

"Land ob watermillions!" groaned the colored boy. "What do dat mean, mo' trouble fo' us?"

Morgan swung alongside the little party, and Tess introduced them in a general way, ending by explaining that they were on their way to the "MM" Ranch, where they hoped to find accommodations for the night.

"We are not in the habit of turnin' anybody away from ther ranch," said the cattleman; "and their company will be very acceptable, if they can put up with our accommodations."

"It is plain that, like your daughter, you fancy we are not accustomed to roughing it, simply because we are tenderfeet, as you call us," said Frank. "I assure you that we shall be very grateful for any kind of accommodations."

"You shall have the best we can give you," bowed Morgan; "but, as you must know, we do not put on much style away out here, and we have very few luxuries."

"We are not looking for luxuries."

As they approached the ranch the owner blew a blast on a silver whistle, and two men came running around the corner.

"Here, Grogan and Carter," said Morgan, "take charge of these bicycles, and see that you handle them like they were made of glass."

"The colored boy will go along with them to see that the wheels are properly cared for," said Frank.

"Very well."

The party had dismounted, and the wheels were turned over to the two men and Toots. As they started around the building the negro lad paused to whisper to Frank:

"Dar's no tellin' what de cowmen will do to me, Marser Frank. If yo' nebber sees me no mo', hullo."

Then he went sadly and falteringly around the corner.

There were a few comfortable chairs on the veranda, and the rancher asked them to sit down there, which they did. Tess had ridden around the house with the horses.

In a short time the boys were chatting pleasantly with Miles Morgan, whom they found a well-educated and well-informed man, although he sometimes fell into the vernacular of the cattle range.

To Frank it seemed remarkable that such a man should have a daughter as illiterate as Tess seemed to be. Certainly he must realize and understand the advantages of an education, which made it a wonder that he had not attempted to have the girl educated.

He questioned them about their trip, and expressed a hope that they reached San Francisco in safety, but told them they were certain to meet with many perils in the great West.

While they were talking, a young fellow in a blazer and straw hat came loafing out by the front door. He wore a white silk shirt, which was beautifully stitched in colors, and a four-in-hand tie was knotted under the collar. His trousers were snowy-white and beautifully creased, while polished russet shoes were on his feet. In his tie flashed a beautiful pin, and there were several rings on his fingers. Clinging to his lips in a limp way was a paper-covered cigarette.

"Sasust grakes—I mean gracious sakes!" gasped Rattleton, as he stared at the youth, who had paused to stare in a languid way at the visitors.

"Young gentlemen," said Miles Morgan, "permit me to introduce my son Elmer. Elmer has lately returned

from the East, where he has been attending Harvard College."

"A-a-aw!" drawled the youth with the cigarette. "This is a weal surpwise, don't yer 'now. I didn't 'now there was any one out heah."

The cattle king gave the names of the four lads on the veranda, all of whom arose and bowed to Elmer, who made a stiff-necked bow in return.

"Weally," said the young dude, staring at the large white letter "Y" on the breasts of the young bicyclists' sweaters. "I wondah what that stands faw?"

"Yale!" cried the boys in chorus.

Elmer elevated his eyebrows, and something like a look of disdain settled on his haughty face.

"A-a-aw!" he drawled. "Yale nothin'." The Old Ni——"

"Hold on!" shouted Rattleton, leaping to his feet. "Stop right there! We have heard that from every Harvard Willie we ever met, and it is getting monotonous. It is stale, and we are sick of hearing you fellows warble, 'Yale nothin'! Take my advice, and riv us a guest—I mean give us a rest."

"Good gwacious!" came in languid astonishment

from Elmer's lips. "How verwy violent in your language and mannaws you awe, thir!"

"That is not nearly as violent as I am liable to become if you make any disparaging remarks about Old Eli," shot back Harry, who was fully aroused. "That is something I can't stand."

"You Yale fellows awe always verwy wude and impulsive, don't yer 'now," said the cattleman's son, as he took out a silver cigarette case and extracted another roll, which he lighted from the half-smoked one that had appeared with him. "You have not the weserve and culchaw that is to be acquired in the classic shades of Hawvard."

"A-a-aw!" drawled the four Yale lads, in chorus.

Frank laughed aloud, although he feared Miles Morgan might be offended. There was something so ludicrous about it all that Frank could not repress his merriment.

But it actually seemed that there was something like a twinkle in the cattle king's eyes, although he kept his face very grave and expressionless.

Elmer gave the "sons of Old Eli" a stare, and then said:

"That is pwoof of your wudeness and lack awve mannahs, don't yer 'now. You awe to be pitied."

"That sounds fine," said Harry; "but I notice poor old Harvard needs pity whenever she stacks up against Yale."

"Oh, I don't know. Hawvard has the honah of winning most awve the debates, my deah fellow."

"But that is all she ever does win, flashed Diamond.

"At baseball she is a back number, her eleven are a lot of nerveless, flabby kids, and her crew has water on the brain. I don't see where Harvard comes in, anyway."

"Haw! She has the men awve bwains, don't yer see, my poor fellow! A common hod-carrier can play bawl, or pull an oah, but it takes bwains to win a debate."

"I presume he considers himself a sample of the men of brains to be found in Harvard," Diamond whispered in Browning's ear.

Bruce grunted, and that grunt was very expressive.

"We are willing Harvard should keep on winning debates, as long as we win at everything else," said Frank.

Elmer surveyed Merriwell in a supercilious manner.

"Let me see," he drawled, "I did not catch youah name. I wondah what you hawve evah done?"

"My name is Frank Merriwell."

"A-a-a-aw! By Jawve! You don't say! It cawn't be you awe the Merriwell that pitches on the Yale nine?"

"I believe I am the only Merriwell who has ever pitched for Yale."

"Good gwacious! And you wow on the crew?"

"Yes, I rowed against Harvard when we beat her this spring."

"Great Scawt! And you awe the fellow who made the wonderful wun in the football game against Princeton last fawl?"

"I am."

"A-a-a-aw! E-e-e-er! Is—it—pawsible?"

Elmer actually gasped for breath, much to Frank's amusement. Then, turning to the cattleman, the young man said:

"Fawther, give Mr. Merriwell the very best the wanch affawds. It is the gweatest possible honar to have him faw a visitor, don't yer 'now."

CHAPTER XXI.

A HARD BLOW.

"Well, the fellow has a little sense, after all!" Harry whispered to Browning. "I didn't suppose he knew enough to appreciate Merry's fine points."

Bruce grunted again, but this time it was a satisfied sound.

Mr. Morgan did not seem to be greatly impressed.

"It is all right to talk about playing ball, rowing, and running in a football game," came with surprising gruffness from his lips; "but I hardly think that kind of business will make a man of a youngster. It takes rough knocks in the battle of life to put real stamina into a lad. Mr. Merriwell may be famous in Eastern college circles, but I hardly think he would make much of a showing out here on a ranch among the rough men of this country."

Frank smiled in a quiet manner.

"You may be right, sir," he admitted. "The life out here and the life of the East are vastly different."

Jack Diamond was about to say something when there came a sudden sound of shots from the rear of the ranch, mingled with wild yells of fear or pain.

The boys sprang to their feet.

"It's Toots!" cried Frank.

Then he leaped from the veranda, and dashed around the corner, followed by the others.

As he came around behind the ranch, Frank saw a red-headed cowboy, who was making Toots dance to the tune of pistol shots. The cowboy held a long-barreled revolver in either hand, and he was sending bullets into the ground around the colored lad's feet.

At a little distance stood other cowboys, all of whom were laughing heartily at the coon's wild leaps and terrified yells.

"Dance, you onery black son of a gun!" roared the cowboy with the revolvers. "Whoop 'er up, you chunk o' darkness from ther bottomless pit! Git up an' claw ther air, you coal-colored relic o' Darkest Afriky!"

"Fo' de Lawd's sakes, don't you' shoot me no mo'!" howled Toots. "I nebber meant nuffin', sar! Oh, Lordy! dis nigger am a goner dis time fo' suah!"

"I'll larn yer ter tell me that yer master'll break my back ef anything happens ter yer old bisuckles!" shouted the red-headed cowboy, as he shot off a piece of leather from the heel of one of Toots' shoes. "W'at d'yer s'pose I care fer yer tenderfoot master? Why, ef he wuz hyar, I'd make him dance ther same as I'm makin' you!"

By this time Frank had reached the cowboy, whom he approached from behind. Reaching around the man, the college lad grasped the revolvers and wrenched them from the owner's hands in the twinkling of an eye. Then he turned and flung them to the ground, facing the astonished "puncher," as that worthy whirled about.

"I rather think we've had quite enough of this kind of business," said Frank, calmly and firmly, his eyes meeting those of the bewildered cowboy.

The man seemed unable to believe the evidence of his senses. Was it possible a boy, a tenderfoot, had dared wrench his "guns" from his hands and speak to him in such a manner?

"Hey?" cried the red-headed man, glaring and showing his teeth. "Why, dern my gizzard!"

"Good gwacious!" gasped Elmer Morgan. "It's Grogan, and he will hurt Mr. Merriwell. Fawther, you must stop it!"

Miles Morgan was on the point of interfering, when, with a snarl of rage, Grogan drew back his fist and struck at Frank.

Then something intensely astounding happened.

Merriwell warded off the blow with ease, and, like a flash of lightning, with the force of a miniature pile-driver, he sent his fist into the ruffian's face.

The back of Grogan's head struck the ground first at a distance of at least twelve feet from where the young college athlete stood. The cowboy lay at full length on the ground, and made no immediate attempt to arise.

Frank had fully realized that he was dealing with a "very bad man," and he had used all the strength and skill he could command in delivering that blow.

Merriwell's fist had fallen on Grogan's jaw with frightful force, so that it seemed that the bones broke beneath the clinched knuckles.

A gasp of wonder that seemed positive unbelief escaped the lips of the cowboys who were spectators.

Never had they seen a prettier knockout blow, and they could not understand that a lad like this stripling in a bicycle suit could hit Eli Grogan hard enough to "put him to sleep" in a moment.

And no one present was more astonished than Miles Morgan, who was on the point of interfering, with a view of saving the rash and over-confident young man.

The cattle king fully expected to see the fallen cowboy spring up and make a dash for the college lad; but nothing of the kind occurred.

Toots' dance of terror suddenly changed to a wild caper of joy.

"Dar!" he cried; "didn' I done tole yo', yo' low-down, no-'count white trash! Dat am Frank Merriwell yeh run again' dat time, ma-an! Guess yo'll know 'nuff teh look out fo' him de nex' time."

"Wa-al, may I be derved!" exploded one cowboy.

"Hang me fer a hoss thief ef I ever seen anything like that!" came from another.

"However did ther tenderfoot do it?" blankly inquired a third.

"Bub-bub-by Jawve!" gasped Elmer Morgan, dropping his cigarette, and standing with his mouth and

eyes open to their widest. "I wuther weckon Mr. Merriwell must be able to fight as well as he does anything else, don't yer 'now."

"Oh, that's nothing for him," languidly declared Bruce Browning, who had succeeded in getting around the corner in time to witness the blow. "He only gave the fellow a light jog on the jaw. If he'd hit him in earnest, Mr. Cowboy'd never tossed another rope."

"You—don't—thay!"

"Young man," said the cattle king, soberly, "I advise you to go into the house as soon as possible."

"Why, sir?" Frank quietly asked.

"Because Grogan will be like a madman when he recovers, and he'll feel like shedding your gore."

"He weally will, don't yer 'now!" put in Elmer.

"Well, as I am unarmed, I do not care to stand up and let Mr. Grogan shoot at me, but I am not going to run away, and he'll be able to find me when he wants to see me."

Morgan could not help admiring the boy's nerve, but he was sure much of it came from the fact that Merriwell did not understand the full extent of his peril. He fancied that, being a tenderfoot, Frank could have

no true conception of the character of the cowboys, many of whom held a human life as of scarcely more value than that of a steer.

The little party returned around the corner to the veranda, leaving the knocked-out cowboy to the care of his comrades.

Elmer Morgan regarded Frank with admiration that was little short of ludicrous. He followed at Merriwell's heels and secured a seat on the veranda close beside him.

Merriwell treated the matter as if it were of little consequence, assuring Mr. Morgan that he did not mind such things, as they were to be expected in the West.

"Land of watermillions!" murmured Toots. "I dunno why dis nigger ebber come out yere, if dat am a fac'."

In order to impress the boys, Mr. Morgan told them stories of the reckless character of the cowboys, ending with a description of an encounter with "rustlers," or cattle thieves.

"I did not suppose there were any rustlers left in the

West, sir," said Frank. "I fancied they had been wiped out long ago."

"They are not as thick as they used to be," confessed the rancher. "Thar was a time when they cut interther cattlemen pretty heavy, but Judge Lynch has made that sort of business 'tarnal resky. All the same, just now Kansas is bothered with a new gang that is stealin' critters with a high hand. They're led by a galoot as calls himself Black Jack, and he is right bad man, you bet! They don't seem able ter rope the varmint no-how."

"Slippery, is he?"

"That's whatever. Never can put your hand on him, and nobody seems to know just what he looks like"

"Where is he carrying on his operations?"

"All along the Arkansas River bottoms."

"Has he hit you very hard?"

"That's uncertain, but it begins to seem that he ain't bothered me much of any, which is queer, I will allow."

"You are one of the most extensive cattle raisers of this region, I believe?"

"I ruther think I am"

"And it looks as if you would be the first one Black Jack would strike? Is that the way of it?"

"Yep."

"How do you account for the fact that you have remained unmolested?"

"I don't 'count for it. I couldn't believe I had escaped, and I've had the boys lookin' over my cattle. So far they report everything pretty near all right."

"Perhaps Black Jack is afraid to molest you."

Morgan shook his head.

"Not likely. He don't seem afraid of anything on top of the earth, any more than is Grogan, the man you had the nerve to knock down a short time ago."

"Black Jack may be knocked out as easy as was Grogan," said Diamond.

"Grogan'd never been knocked out if Mr. Merriwell hadn't took him by surprise," declared the rancher.

"That's where you fool yourself," hastily put in Rattleton. "I say, Frank, just muss up and show your stripple—I mean strip up and show your muscle."

"It is not at all necessary," said Mr. Morgan, quietly. "I fully understand that Mr. Merriwell has plenty of muscle, else he'd never been able to strike a blow that

would have settled Grogan in a moment; but what I do claim is that it was most fortunate for him that he could strike such a blow, and that he used it quick enough to take Grogan off his guard. Otherwise, I am inclined to think he would not have been given a chance to use it at all."

"Then is Grogan such a terrible fighter?" asked Frank.

"He is a devil! You would have been torn limb from limb, if you had not settled his case with one blow."

"Perhaps you are right."

"Perhaps so. Why, I know it!"

"All right," smiled Merriwell. "We will let it go at that."

CHAPTER XXII.

GROGAN'S REVENGE.

Supper on the ranch took place at five o'clock in the afternoon. It was a very plain meal, but there was plenty of good hearty food, which satisfied the hungry young bicyclists.

Tess was at the table. She had changed her dress, and appeared in a garment that astonished the boys not a little, for it was tasty and well made, as if it had been created for her by an accomplished dressmaker.

But the girl had not changed her manners with her dress. She clung to the vernacular of the cattle range, and, although it was rather rough, somehow her words and manner contrasted favorably with the drawl and effeminate affectations of her college-bred brother.

"Wa-al, Mr. Merriwell," said Tess, "I ruther reckon ye've looked round ther ranch enough to find out how yer like it? What have yer got ter say, anyway?"

This manner of putting the question took Merriwell

aback for a moment, but he quickly recovered, and answered:

"Surely, Miss Morgan, you can't think I have had time enough to form an opinion that would be of any value."

"I don't expect that yer'll do that nohow," she frankly said. "Ther opinion o' a tenderfoot ain't no good, but I thought I'd ask yer. Ef yer travels round ther place much, ye'd better have paw with yer, fer some o' ther punchers might take a notion ter step on yer. They don't cotton ter tenderfeet none whatever."

"A-a-a-aw!" put in Elmer. "I say, sistaw."

"A-a-a-aw!" mimicked Tess. "What do yer say, brothaw?"

"Now, don't be wude!" implored the Harvard "man." "I wuther think you don't know what Mr. Merriwell has done at college."

"Naw," with great disdain. "What haws Mr. Merriwell done at college?"

"Why, he is the gweatest pitchaw Yale evah had on her bawl team."

"Wa-al, ball pitchers don't cut ice out this way."

"And he belongs to the Yale crew, don't yer 'now."

"Wonderful! He should be decorated with a leather medal!"

"An-an-and he plays footbawl, sistaw."

"Ye don't say! Still more wonderful! Go on!"

"He is the man that made the famous wun in the Yale and Princeton football game in New York last fawl. He won the game faw Yale by that wun."

"Wa-al, I'd like ter know what all that amounts ter! Ef he should hump up agin' one of the cowboys on this yar ranch, he'd git hisself broke in two in less than two shakes. That's whatever."

"But he haws, don't yer 'now."

"Has what?"

"Had a wow with a cowboy."

"Had a row with a cowboy? Where? Here on the ranch? And he is still alive to tell of it? Where's the cowboy?"

"Weally I don't know, sistah; he may be dead by this time."

"Then I presume somebody had to shoot him to keep him from killing one of our tenderfoot visitors? That was too bad, blamed ef it wuzn't!"

"You awe mistaken, don't yer 'now. Mr. Merriwell stwuck him."

"Struck him? And is living yet? Wa-al, what did Mr. Merriwell hit him with?"

"Nawthing but his fist."

"Eh?"

"Thawt was quite sufficient, don't yer 'now. It knocked the fellow down, and he lay there."

Tess put her hands on her hips and stared hard at Frank.

"Wa-al," she finally said. "I reckon you must be a fool fer luck! Who was it ye hit?"

"I believe his name is Grogan," answered the lad, with a smile.

The girl came near fainting on her chair.

"Grogan? Why, he's a wuss man that Hannah! An' yer knocked him down? Say, Grogan must be roped and corraled while yer git out of Kansas! Ef he ain't, why, ye'll never git out with a whole skin!"

"I'll take my chances on that," laughed Frank. "I have seen bad men before. This is not my first visit West."

"And yer don't carry a gun?"

"No."

"Wa-al, derved ef that don't beat me!"

"Tess!" said the cattle king, reprovingly, as yet with a smile hovering about his lips, "I wish you would be a little more careful about your language."

"Careful!" cried the queer girl. "An' with this sort o' provocation! Ask me somethin' easy, paw. Thar ain't words enough in ther English language ter express my feelin's."

"We'll have to invent a few for your use," said Frank, pleasantly.

The meal passed off cheerfully, but Tess did not recover from her astonishment. It seemed difficult for her to realize that a fellow like Frank could strike Grogan and escape with his life.

After supper the girl disappeared once more, and the boys were again invited to the coolness of the veranda. Mr. Morgan offered them cigars, but Browning was the only one to accept. Merriwell had impressed upon them all the fact that coffee and cigars are wind-breakers for any long-distance bicycle rider. Bruce, however, persisted in smoking, saying it kept his flesh

down, although no one but himself could see that it had any effect in that direction.

Elmer continued to linger close to Frank, to whose every word he listened with attentiveness that was flattering, although somewhat annoying. He consumed cigarettes in a most appalling manner.

Mr. Morgan again fell to speaking of the rustlers, and said that he feared they might make an attempt to run off some of his fine horses.

"Then you raise horses, as well as cattle?" questioned Frank.

"Yes, I have taken up horse-raising of late."

"And you are making a success of it?"

"I seldom make a failure of anything, young man. If you wish to see some fine-blooded animals, come out to the horse-barn with me."

Frank readily accepted the invitation, and the others were asked to come along. They followed the cattle king toward the barn.

On the way, several cowboys appeared, and all of them stared at Frank, as if they saw a most extraordinary creature.

The horse-barn was a large building, with a feed-

loft. Within the barn were kept the very finest of Mr. Morgan's blooded horses, and the boys enjoyed half an hour looking the handsome creatures over and hearing the man talk about them.

At last, the rancher said: "

"If you care to climb the feed-loft, I will show you the handsomest horse I own, young gentlemen."

"We are willing enough to climb," assured Frank; "but you can't mean that you keep a horse in the loft."

"Not quite that, but the loft is the only real safe position from which to take a look at the creature."

Bruce groaned, but finally decided to make the climb.

When the loft was reached, the cattleman led the way to a door in the side of the barn, which he opened, crying:

"There, young gentlemen, take a look at him! There is Demon, the handsomest and ugliest horse I own! He has killed one man who was trying to break him, and he will do his best to repeat the job with the next chap who enters the corral."

They could look down from their elevated position into the small breaking-corral, with a snubbing-post in the centre. The fence of the corral was made of

heavy timbers, and was constructed in a manner intended to withstand the assaults of any number of confined horses that might attempt to break out. The ground was worn smooth and denuded of grass by the unshod feet of the many untamed horses the place had held.

But now the breaking-corral held but one horse, a young coal-black stallion, with glossy coat, proudly arching neck, and a heavy tail that swept rearward like a rainbow.

This creature was moving restlessly about the corral, tossing its head and pawing the ground at intervals. There was a deadly look in its wicked eyes, and it gave a snort of anger and defiance when the door of the loft was flung open and the human beings gathered above were revealed to its eyes.

Exclamations of delight and admiration escaped the boys.

"Surely he is a beauty!" cried Frank Merriwell.

"You let your bife—I mean you bet your life!" burst from Rattleton. "He is a pegular reach—no, a regular peach!"

There was a flush on Jack Diamond's face, and he slowly said:

"My father once owned many handsome horses, Mr. Morgan, but I do not believe he ever had a creature the equal of that."

"By gracious!" cried Toots, rolling his eyes. "I'd jes' lek teh hab dat hawse, chilluns—yas, indeedy! sho' I would!"

"I rather think you would find him an elephant on your hands," said the rancher, who had noted that the colored boy was treated with unusual respect by his companions.

"Why, dat ain't no elemfunt, sar. Dat's a pony, fo' suah. I'd lek teh take a ride on his back dis minute."

"No one has yet been able to get on his back, and the last man to try it was taken out of the corral with his brains kicked out."

"Land ob watermillions!"

"If the next man does not succeed, I'm afraid we'll have to kill Demon."

"That would be a shame!" cried Diamond.

"I have sent for a professional horse-breaker, who will be here to-morrow, I expect," Mr. Morgan went

on. "I shall have to pay him a fancy figure, if he succeeds in breaking Demon, but I rather think the animal will be worth it."

There was a strange glitter in Frank's eyes. At last, he said:

"I don't know as I care to try it, but I feel an intense desire to go down there and see what I can do with that beauty."

There was a hoarse exclamation behind the boy, and a voice cried:

"Then down yer goes, tenderfoot, an' ther hoss will kill yer in less than a minute!"

It was Grogan's voice, and Grogan's hands sent Frank flying from the door to fall into the breaking-corral.

CHAPTER XXIII.

FRANK AND THE WILD HORSE.

The black stallion started back, giving a snort, as it saw that human form shoot out of the door above and come sailing down into the corral.

Not a cry came from Frank's lips, but he caught his breath as he felt himself launched from the door and sent flying through space.

The other boys cried out, and Jack, quicker than the rest, made an attempt to catch hold of Frank, but missed.

With a hoarse laugh of evil triumph, Grogan turned and fled from the door, satisfied that he had completed the destruction of the boy he hated.

Mr. Morgan cried out with horror, and Elmer came near fainting.

"He will be killed!" shouted the cattle king. "He can't escape!"

Frank's friends uttered a series of exclamations, and Jack Diamond would have leaped into the corral to

render such aid as possible to the unfortunate lad, but he was held back by Browning's strong hands.

Frank struck on his feet, but did not fall. In a moment, recovering from his astonishment, the black stallion gave a wild squeal, and charged.

How the boy avoided that swift rush and those twinkling heels he could not have told, but, like a leaping cat, he was away as the horse whirled to kick.

Then it was that he saw something bright come whirling down through the air, striking the ground at his feet.

From above the voice of Miles Morgan cried:

"It's my revolver! Take it, boy—take it, and shoot the infernal horse! It will kill yer, if you don't!"

Frank caught up the weapon, leaping and dodging before a second rush from the stallion.

Then, with that heavy, glistening "gun" in his grasp, the boy actually laughed! It was the old-time reckless laugh that his friends had sometimes heard when he was in great peril.

Yet he did not use the revolver, but danced around lightly, every movement showing wonderful agility and grace.

Already Harry Rattleton had rushed from the loft, leaped to the floor below, and was rushing around to fling open the gate of the corral, panting, palpitating, praying.

Miles Morgan leaned out of the door, waving his arm, and shouted:

"Shoot the horse—shoot him, boy!"

Frank did not seem to hear the cry.

"Shoot the horse!" came in a roar from the man's lips. "He will kill you if you don't! Shoot him! shoot him! shoot him!"

Once more the infuriated stallion charged at Frank, and this time it seemed that the boy determined to follow Morgan's directions, for he suddenly flung up the hand that held the revolver.

Then, with the greatest rapidity, he seemed to fire six shots point-blank at the stallion's head.

The horse did not fall, but it halted, seeming bewildered for the moment.

In truth, Frank had not fired a single shot straight at the beautiful black beast, but had sent the bullets whistling past its ears.

Before the stallion could recover from its momentary

bewilderment, Frank flung aside the revolver, made a run and a flying leap that carried him to the back of the astonished animal.

“Hoop-la!” rang out his clear shout. “Open the gate! open the gate! Give us room to circulate!”

Harry Rattleton had reached the gate, and his shaking fingers were tugging at the iron pin that held it fast. He heard Frank’s shout, and, thinking his friend must be in the most deadly peril, did his utmost to get the gate open immediately.

Fortunately, Rattleton succeeded without delay.

Then, clinging like a leech to the back of the black stallion, and yelling like a wild Indian in the creature’s ear, Frank was carried with a rush out through the gate.

Frank had heard that wild horses often attempted to “squeeze” riders when passing through the gate of a corral, and he was ready for it should the stallion try the trick.

But Demon seemed astonished by the sudden opening of the gate—seemed to fear that it would be closed again with equal suddenness. He flung up his head,

with a wild squeal, and went tearing out of the corral, like a mad creature.

"Hoop-la! Here we go! Clear the road!"

The cry came from Merriwell's lips, as the stallion bore him away.

Like an arrow from the bow, Demon shot across the prairie, seeming to think it possible to run away from the human being that was clinging to his back.

"Well, earn my dyes—I mean dern my eyes!" gurgled Harry, as he stared after his friend. "If that isn't just like Frank Merriwell! Any other fellow'd never tried to mount the infernal horse!"

The stallion did not pause to try the tricks of a bucking bronco, and, very fortunately, it did not seem to think of attempting to tear the clinging lad from its back with its teeth. Its one idea seemed to be to get as far from that confining breaking-corral as possible in a short time.

Away, away sped the horse, with the boy sitting astride its bare back, and sticking there as if a part of the animal. It was a splendid exhibition of horsemanship, and Rattleton was overcome with admiration.

"If he had a halter on the creature, he'd bring it

back as quiet as a kitten. That would be just like him, too. He is a corker, that's what he is!"

Then he leaned back against the corral gate, and stood there, watching the receding boy and horse.

Some of the cowboys about the ranch had seen Rat-tleton rush to the gate and fling it open, had seen the untamed horse bear the boy out of the corral, and had witnessed, with the most profound astonishment, the Centaur-like manner in which the lad sat upon the unsaddled back of the stallion as it sped away.

Grogan had reached the open air, and he was a witness of all this. He stared, as if unable to believe what he saw. Then he rubbed his eyes and stared again.

When he could comprehend what had happened, the language that flowed from his lips was more violent than polite. He finished by gasping:

"A tenderfoot—a mere kid! an' he rides like a puncher! Wa'al, may I be eternally burned!"

Then Miles Morgan and the boys came hurrying from the stable, and stood watching Frank and the black stallion, till both boy and horse had vanished in

the dusk of night, which was swiftly settling over the plains.

"It's too bad!" exclaimed the cattle raiser.

"What is too bad?" asked Diamond.

"That the boy should allow Demon to carry him away like that. I doubt if we ever see boy or horse again."

"Well, now, don't fool yourself like that," returned Jack, with the greatest confidence. "The chances are about ten to one that you will see them both, and the boy will bring back the horse quite tamed and broken."

"Now yo's jes' shoutin', Mistah Di'mon," nodded Toots. "Nebber no hawse ebber fool dat chile."

"But—but it is impossible!" cried Mr. Morgan. "Why, he has no means of breaking the creature! Such a thing could not be done without the aid of a breaking bit, and, even then, that boy would not know how to accomplish it."

Browning grunted, while the young Virginian rather warmly said:

"You would not have thought it possible for him to ride the stallion in such a manner. It may occur to

you that he can do a few things you have fancied quite beyond being accomplished by a 'tenderfoot.' "

"Don't get touchy, young man," said the rancher, kindly. "It is plain enough to me that Mr. Merriwell is quite remarkable in a number of ways; but that is no reason why I should expect an impossibility of him. Not even the best of horse-breakers could bring Demon back without the aid of appliances with which to accomplish the trick."

"It is a wondah he was nawt killed, don't yer know," put in Elmer. "I nevah saw anything so wemarkable—weally I nevah did."

"Oh, that wasn't anything," drawled Browning.

"It came very near being his death!" cried Miles Morgan. "And Grogan was responsible for it all! He shall be properly punished!"

"That is wight, fawther," nodded Elmer. "I hope you will tweat the wude wuffian as he deserves."

"I will," promised the cattle king, "and I will see to that at once."

Then he proceeded to look for Eli Grogan.

When Grogan was found, however, he was mounted

on his own tough little bronco, and was riding away as fast as the beast could carry him.

"He knew better than to remain here," said Mr. Morgan. "He knew what to expect from me, and it will not be a healthy thing for him if he ever shows his head on this ranch again."

In the meantime, into the gathering darkness the wild horse bore the young athlete from Yale.

Fierce and furious was that ride across the dusky plain. The wind whistled past Frank's ears and brought the blood leaping in a flush to his cheeks. His heart leaped with a wild, exultant energy, and all his body tingled with a feeling of boundless delight.

"Go it, old boy!" he cried, again laughing in that reckless way. "I rather think I can stand it as long as you can. This is the most sport I have struck on the trip."

The horse answered with another wild scream, and seemed to dart forward with a fresh burst of speed that was little short of marvelous.

The short grass made a carpet upon which the feet

of the horse thudded softly. And night came down as they raced away, away.

The undulations became more frequent and abrupt, till they were something like hills, and then Frank saw what, at first, he took for a herd of cattle.

In another moment there were shrill cries and hoarse shouts, and Frank found himself in the midst of a party of horsemen. With a suddenness that was bewildering, Demon was fighting with hoofs and feet, rearing, kicking, biting, squealing and snorting.

Then Frank felt himself torn from the back of the horse and hurled to the ground, where he was in danger of being trodden upon, of having his brains dashed out by those flying heels.

A very fiend seemed to possess the black stallion, for it did not try to break away, but it continued to assault men and horses as if it sought to destroy them all.

Frank found himself beneath a horse and managed to leap aside with such swiftness that no harm came to him, although something hard, like iron, brushed his cheek.

As he tried to get upon his feet, he was struck and

hurled down once more, and it again seemed that he must be fatally injured in that terrible tangle.

Then it was that something struck his head, and he dropped limply, lying helpless and still beneath those prancing hoofs, quite unconscious of the mad struggle that was going on around and above him.

CHAPTER XXIV.

AT THE END OF A ROPE.

Frank was not stunned for long, but when he recovered he found his hands were securely bound and he was a captive.

Near by two men were smoking vile-smelling pipes, while they talked in guarded tones.

Further away were other men and horses, which could be seen dimly through the darkness.

Even before Frank's senses fully returned, he heard the hum of voices, and realized that human beings were near. There was a mild roaring in his head, which pained him somewhat, and he wondered if his skull had been cracked by the hoofs of one of those prancing horses.

When he was fully conscious he did not stir, but remained quiet, listening to the talk of the men who were smoking the rank-smelling pipes.

"It sure is ther black hoss from Morgan's ranch," said one of them; "but how ther boy happened ter be

ridin' ther critter is what I can't explain none whatever."

"No more kin I," admitted the other. "Hannah says as how he knows ther tenderfoot, an' has a grudge ag'in him, which he proposes ter settle w'en he comes around."

"Ef he does come aroun'; but I reckon he got a right smart crack on the head, an' that may be a settler."

"Which will be lucky for him, as it'll be easier than settlin' with Hannah."

"You bet! Hannah is a bad man—'most as bad as ther cap'n."

Frank wondered who these men could be. Were they cowboys? It seemed so, for Hannibal Jones was one of Miles Morgan's men.

But what were they doing out here on the plains? And where were the cattle?

Somehow it seemed to Frank that there was something wrong about these men, and he continued to listen, hoping their words would give him a hint of the truth.

"It's gittin' nigh time fer ther cap'n ter show up," one of them mumbled. "He'll be here soon."

"Yer can't count on that," declared the other. "He'll hev ter snake erway from ther ranch, an' I reckon they're keepin' watch around thar mighty close."

"Wa-al, let 'em watch. Old Morgan loses his best hawses ter-night. We need ther critters in our business."

"Ef we didn't ther cap'n never'd tetch 'em, fer he's steered clear o' botherin' Morgan, knowin' Morgan might make it hot fer us ef he wuz ter git aroused."

Frank caught his breath, overwhelmed with a sudden thought. He knew the kind of men into whose power he had fallen.

"Rustlers!"

The boy came near uttering the word aloud, but choked it back.

These men were planning to run off some of Miles Morgan's horses, and that made it certain they were rustlers. Hannah was one of the gang, and the captain was at some ranch near by. Miles Morgan owned the only ranch within fifty miles, so it must be at Morgan's ranch that the captain of the ruffians was stopping.

"Well, I have tumbled onto a rather astonishing dis-

covery," thought the captive lad; "but it may not do me much good. I am in a tight box, and there is very little prospect that I will escape in time to warn Morgan."

A man approached through the darkness, and surlily asked:

"Wa-al, how is ther tenderfoot?"

"Ain't stirred yit, Hannah," answered one of the two guards.

"Wa-al, it takes ther critter a right smart bit ter come around. Mebbe he's playin' 'possum."

He stopped near Frank, struck a match, shielding it from the wind in the hollow of his palms, and stooped so he could throw the light on the captive lad's face.

Frank's eyes were closed, and he looked pale and unconscious.

Taking the boy by the arm, the man gave him a shake, roughly saying:

"Wake up, hyar! No funny business! I knows ye're shammin'."

But Frank did not stir.

An angry exclamation broke from Hannah's lips, and he dropped the match, straightening up.

"Derned ef I fool with him longer!" exclaimed the ruffian. "I did want him ter come around, so he'd know I wuz doin' ther job, but he may not come around at all. More'n that, thar's no tellin' what sort of a row ther cap'n might kick up, so I'll carve ther tenderfoot now."

From his half-open eyes Frank fancied he saw the man draw a knife.

"W'at are yer going ter do, Hannah?" quickly asked one of the guards. "Better go slow, pard."

"Now, don't you try ter mix in none whatever, Bill," hoarsely advised the ruffian, as he knelt beside the boy. "It ain't none o' yer funeral, but it may be, if you git cantankerous. Hannibal Jones don't keer ter be meddled with."

"Hold on, Hannah!" urged the other man. "Ye're takin' a heap o' responsibility onter yer shoulders when you knifes a critter 'thout havin' ther cap'n's permission."

"Wa-al, dern——"

"Keerful! Yer don't want ter dern ther cap'n."

"I wuzn't; I wuz goin' ter durn you fer a meddler."

"My meddlin' may save your hide. You know

Black Jack'd bore yer quicker then yer could spit, ef he took ther notion."

There was no longer a doubt in Frank's mind; he had fallen into the hands of Black Jack's band. He scarcely realized his position, but he was helpless, which forced him to make the most of it.

The words of the man who had been called Bill seemed to have some influence on Hannah, for, after a period of hesitation, he put up his knife, muttering:

"It ain't any use ter be in a hurry. I'll wait till ther tenderfoot kid comes around, so he'll know who is doin' him up."

Frank breathed easier. He had been prepared to roll over and over to escape the knife in the ruffian's hands in case Hannah tried to carry out his murderous intention, but such a move was unnecessary, for the desperado arose, gave the boy a kick, and wandered away.

Barely had Hannah departed, when one of the two guards detected a distant sound that filled him with interest. He listened intently, and the bound lad was likewise able to hear it.

"A horseman," thought Frank. "He is approaching."

"It must be ther cap'n," said Bill, expressing the conviction that had come upon Merriwell.

Then far out on the plain came a shrill, piercing whistle. Immediately the signal was answered by a similar whistle from the group of men near Frank, and there was a general stir.

"It is ther cap'n!" said the two guards, as they hastily arose to their feet. "He's on hand early."

Unperceived, Frank strained with all his strength at the cords which held his hands, hoping to break them and make an effort to get away, while the rustlers were intent on the approach of their leader.

In vain!

Frank's struggles simply served to cause the cords to cut into his wrists, but did not loosen them in the least.

"Well," he panted, "this looks as if I am in for it. It is no use, I can't get away in this fashion."

Having decided that he could not escape, Frank gave over his efforts, resolving to let matters take their course.

In a few moments the horseman was close at hand, and then he came tearing up to the group of men, throwing his animal on its haunches, and dismounting at a bound.

Frank could hear the men talking, and the voice seemed familiar to the boy. He was sure he had heard it before.

A few minutes passed, and then the captain of the rustlers approached the spot where the bound boy lay.

The guards showed the leader the greatest respect, but he gave them no word or look.

"Strike a brimstone!" he hoarsely ordered. "Give me a look at ther bird ye've captured."

The men hastened to obey, and a light soon revealed Merriwell's face to the searching eyes of the rustler chief.

A cry of satisfaction came from Black Jack.

"I reckoned as much!" he said, exultantly. "It's ther ornery galoot as got away from me once! But he won't git erway ag'in, you bet!"

Frank's blood grew cold in his veins, for now he recognized the voice, and he knew the full extent of his peril. He could not hope that the leader of the

rustlers would show him a grain of mercy. Better a quick death at the hands of the ruffian Hannah than the vengeance the chief of the cattle stealers would wreak upon him.

For in Black Jack, the rustler, he recognized Eli Grogan!

Yes, it was the same man, although his red hair and beard had disappeared. His hair was now clipped short and was coal black.

As the match flickered and went out, through his eyelashes Frank saw the look of malignant hatred and triumph which contorted the features of the man who stood over him.

Then came darkness, and Merriwell felt his heart give a great shuddering leap in his bosom.

Frank knew not how quickly Black Jack might seek to wreak vengeance on the rash tenderfoot who had knocked him senseless with a single terrible blow. In the darkness which followed the extinction of the match the wretch might be drawing "gun" or "sticker" with which to square the debt he felt he owed the boy.

Merriwell opened his eyes.

"If I must die, I will look my foe straight in the

face," he thought. "Steady, old man! Don't let him have the satisfaction of seeing you quail or hearing you squeal!"

He brought all his wonderful will-power into service, and when another match flared up, Black Jack was astonished to see the boy calmly looking up into his face.

"So ye've come around, have yer?" muttered the leader of the rustlers. "Wa-al, how d'yer like yer situation?"

"Well," was the calm and steady reply, "I must confess that I do not like it as well as I might. I have been trying to get my hands free so I could give you another pat on the jaw, but the ropes are cutting into my wrists. It is uncomfortable, but I am no kicker, so I shall not make much fuss about it."

Black Jack gasped for breath.

"Dern me!" he growled. "Thet's what I call nerve."

"Thank you."

This did not seem to please the chief of the cattle stealers. With a fierce exclamation he squatted beside the captive, while the second match flickered and went

out. One of the men lighted another match, but the chief told him to throw it away.

"It ain't needed now," he said. "Just git out an' leave us alone. I wants ter talk with yar fly tender-foot."

The men withdrew a short distance, leaving their leader alone with the captive, as this seemed to be Jack's desire.

The man brought forth a pipe and whittled some tobacco from a plug, seeming to peer like a hawk through the darkness while he was thus occupied.

Frank could feel that the man was watching him as closely as possible under the circumstances, but the boy waited for Jack to speak.

After a time the ruffian had filled his pipe, which he proceeded to light. He was deliberate in his movements, and Frank wondered what was passing in the fellow's mind.

Having succeeded in causing the pipe to draw in a manner that was satisfactory, Black Jack continued to smoke and stare through the darkness at the boy. He seemed to be meditating.

"I'm kinder thinkin' what would be a right good way

ter give yer a send-off," the man finally said. "I don't keer ter send yer off ther hooks too quick, as thar wouldn't be no great satisfaction in that. To be sure," he added, "I might use this yar sticker on yer."

He bent over, placing one hand on the boy's breast, and Frank felt the keen point of the knife pricking his throat.

"I should jedge yer joogler vein oughter be about thar," observed the brute, grimly. "This sticker is keen as a razor, an' it wouldn't take no more'n a gentle push ter tap yer."

The situation was enough to shake the nerve of the bravest, and it is not strange that Frank stiffened in every limb, holding himself calm with a great effort.

"Mebbe that's be ther best way, arter all," said the chief, as if considering the advisability of such an act.

"It'd settle ther matter quick like, an' I w'u'dn't hev ter bother with yer no more. Mebbe I'd better open up yer wizzend."

Then it was that Merriwell again brought all his remarkable nerve into play, and the laugh that came from his lips seemed genuine and unforced.

"You have got the call in this game," came smoothly

from the lad's lips. "It's not for me to advise you concerning the best way of doing the little trick."

Frank felt the knife prick yet more keenly, and then it was removed suddenly, and a string of violent exclamations came from the lips of the rustler.

"Look hyar, boy!" snarled the man, when he had exhausted himself in this manner, "yer don't want ter git ther notion that this yar is foolin'. Black Jack never fools."

"I trust not," said Frank, coolly. "I do not care to be fooled with. It will prolong the agony, that is all."

"I'm goin' ter wipe yer out!"

"I presumed that was your intention."

"Wa-al, yer don't seem ter realize w'at it means."

"Oh, yes, I do!"

"Derned ef yer acts that way! Hev yer got any grudges ag'in yerself that makes ye tired o' livin'?"

"No. In fact, I enjoy living very well, and I have made the most of life, although you may consider me rather young in years. I have had a jolly good time while I have lived, and I can't kick if the game ends now. I have had more fun during my life than most

fellows could have if they lived to be a thousand. I've always managed to squeeze a large amount of satisfaction out of everything. Just think of the fun I had with you at the ranch this afternoon! Why, I thumped you as if you were a punching bag!"

There was a hoarse gurgle in the man's throat, and he seemed unable to speak for some moments.

"I have noticed," Merriwell serenely went on, "that you seem to articulate with some difficulty. I trust I did not injure your jaw permanently?"

Once more the man resorted to violent language. Then he suddenly bent over and struck Frank savagely in the face.

The boy saw the blow coming and he moved his head so he did not receive the full shock of it, although it was sufficient to daze him for some seconds. Bright lights seemed to flash before Frank's eyes, and there was a roaring and ringing sound in his head for several minutes after the blow.

But not a sound came from Merriwell's lips, his teeth being firmly set in the effort to hold back any cry that might seek utterance.

"Thar!" panted the rustler. "That makes us squar' in one way!"

"Do you think so?"

"Yes."

"That shows how much you know about such matters," said the boy. "You may be a first-class cut-throat and cattle stealer, but you don't know how to strike a blow any more than a baby."

For a moment it appeared that the man would fling himself on the cool and tantalizing lad and rain blows upon that taunting mouth; but he seemed to think better of it, for he settled back, uttering a growl like a dog.

"Wa-al, may I be chawed!" he muttered. "I can't understand yer, tenderfoot, none whatever."

"What do you mean, sir? Am I not speaking straight United States?"

"Oh, yes; that's all right. What yer says is plain enough, but what yer means is ther sticker."

"I mean what I say."

"Mebbe yer do."

"Certainly I do. To illustrate, if you will put yourself in my place, and let me take your place, I'll agree to show you how to strike a blow that amounts to

something. I'll guarantee that you won't be able to lift any cattle for a week after I hit you."

Black Jack remembered the blow he had received earlier in the day, and it led him to believe there was something more than idle boasting in the words of the boy.

But what sort of a tenderfoot was this, who could talk in such a nonchalant manner under such circumstances? Surely he was not an ordinary sort of boy.

"Yer don't git no chance ter hit me ag'in," declared the man.

"I'm sorry," assured Frank. "It would give me great satisfaction to nail you just once. I believe I could die easier after that. In fact, I am quite sure of it."

The chief was silent. He seemed to be meditating once more.

"I hev it!" he exclaimed, after some moments.

Then he rose to his feet, and ordered:

"Bring up ther black hoss. Put a cinch aroun' ther critter."

"I wonder what game he is up to now?" speculated Frank.

The chief's order was soon obeyed and the horse was brought forward with some difficulty, being handled by several men, whom it resisted and struggled against.

Black Jack dropped beside Frank once more, saying, swiftly:

"I ain't goin' ter cut yer throat, tenderfoot; but I'm goin' ter give yer a nice little ride at ther end of a rope."

"You are very kind."

"Think so? Wa-al—ho! ho!—yer may change yer tune. This hoss is Demon, ther critter w'at berlongs ter Miles Morgan."

"Indeed! I did not suppose Demon could be captured."

"Wa-al, ther boys managed ter rope ther critter arter it brought yer to 'em, an' they've held it sence. Now we're goin' ter let it go."

"I should not think you'd wish to lose the horse."

"Wa-al, we can't waste time ter break it. We've got business on our hands fer ter-night. Thet's why I'm goin' ter dispose o' you right sudden."

Frank was silent.

"Hitch a rope ter ther cinch," directed the rustler chief.

This order was obeyed with some difficulty, but it was accomplished at last.

"Tie ther rope around ther tenderfoot's ankles," commanded Black Jack, "an' make it fast."

The men hastened to obey.

Now Frank understood what the chief's game was to be. He would set the horse free to dash madly over the night-shrouded plain, dragging the boy at the end of the lariat.

Frank shuddered with horror as he comprehended his doom. In fancy he felt himself yanked along at the end of the rope, bounding, thumping, whirling across the plain, the breath of life beaten from his lips.

And Frank was helpless to make a struggle. There was nothing for it but to submit to his fate.

Believing that death could not be escaped, Frank prayed. He did not utter the words aloud, but his heart overflowed with a prayer in which he commended his soul to its Maker.

He thought of the friends he would never again see—of Rattleton, Diamond, Browning, and of Toots,

the faithful colored boy. Would they ever know what fate had befallen him? Would his battered body be found and buried? Or would his bones be picked by vultures and coyotes?

Other thoughts flashed with wonderful swiftness through his abnormally active brain. Never again would he see dear old Yale, never stand under the great elms beneath the shade of which he had laughed and joyed and sang so many times.

He wondered if the fellows would miss him—if many of them would drop a tear to his memory. Their faces seemed clustering around him—Griswold, jolly and full of life; Jones, solemn and sad; Pierson, tall and handsome; Halliday, who had ever been a true friend.

There were others, scores of them, his friends and his foes.

His foes! He thought of them, and in that moment when it seemed that his life was soon to terminate, he forgave them all. He even censured himself for being so harsh with some of them. They were human, and they had the failings of human beings. What if they

had not liked him? What if some of them had tried to injure him?

Yes, he forgave Ditson, Flemming, Harris, Harlow—all of them.

A hoarse whisper was hissing into his ear, arousing him to a sense of what was actually taking place. He heard the words:

"Don't think yer kin escape me this yar way, tenderfoot! I hed ther fust rumpus with yer, an' I'll be ther last ter settle with yer! It wouldn't do ter step in ahead o' ther chief, but I've fixed it so we'll meet ag'in."

The speaker was Hannah, the cowboy with whom Frank had had the trouble before reaching Morgan's Ranch.

Frank heard the words, but he did not comprehend their meaning. A moment later Black Jack was at his side.

"Everything is ready, tenderfoot," said the chief of the rustlers. "In a moment you'll be scootin' over ther grass at a lively rate. Is thar anything yer wants ter say before yer scoots?"

"No."

"Then good-by. Let 'er go!"

There was a wild yell, and with a snort the freed horse shot away into the darkness, like an arrow from the bow, dragging a human body at his heels!

CHAPTER XXV.

FICKLE FORTUNE.

Frank felt a jerk at his feet, felt himself snatched along, struck the ground with a thump that drove the breath in a puff from his lips, bounded, fell again, and then——

It was all over in a moment, as it seemed. The boy found himself lying gasping on the ground, feeling as if his legs had been torn from his body at the hips and he had been pounded in a score of places with heavy sledge-hammers.

But he was no longer dragged along, although he still remained bound and helpless.

What had happened? How was it that he was no longer dragged across the plain at the heels of a fiery wild horse that was mad with the exultation of new-found freedom?

A trick—it must be a trick! The rustler chief had not intended that he should be dragged to death in that manner, but had sought to terrify and torture him.

That was the thought which rushed upon him.

He lay there waiting for the rustlers to gather around him—expecting to hear the hated voice of Black Jack once more.

Then, far away, he could hear the galloping horse, as the creature was still tearing madly through the darkness.

It was some time before Frank's brain seemed to work as it should.

Where were the rustlers? He listened, but could hear nothing of them.

Then he tried to think how it came about that he was not still attached to the flying horse.

The rope must have broken!

But why the rope should have broken was a puzzle to him, for he knew it was a lariat, such as cowboys used to noose cattle, and such rope could stand a wonderful strain.

"It did not break in a natural manner," decided the boy.

At first, his sensation was one of unspeakable relief. He had been spared from death, and he had escaped from the rustlers.

But another thought followed. He was still bound and helpless, and he was alone on the plain. He could not set himself at liberty, which meant that he must remain there and perish, unless some one appeared to release him.

The thought of all these horrors was enough to force a groan from Frank's lips, despite his wonderful nerve.

Then came an overpowering temptation to shout—to call for help. It did not seem that he had been dragged so far from the rustlers that his voice would not reach their ears.

Better death at the hands of Black Jack than a lingering death of thirst and starvation there on the plain.

His lips parted to utter the cry, and then came a thought that kept him silent.

He had vowed that Black Jack should not have the satisfaction of hearing him beg, or cry for help. If the cry should reach the ears of the rustler chief it would give the brutal wretch great satisfaction.

Possibly Black Jack was near at hand, waiting to hear that appeal.

"No," he mused; "it will mean death anyway, and

I will keep silent. Perhaps some one may find me here and set me free."

Then, as he lay there, thinking of all that had happened, he suddenly remembered the words the cowboy Hannah had hissed into his ear just before the horse started on its wild career across the plain.

Hannah had said that he dared not interfere with the chief's work, but he had fixed it so he would meet Frank again.

What had the ruffian meant by those words?

"Can it be?" muttered Frank. "Did he fix the rope so it broke before I was dragged to death?"

After a little the boy was firm in the belief that this was how it came about that the rope attached to the horse had parted. It had been cut by Hannah.

"Well, I don't know that I have much to thank him for," said Frank, huskily. "I am here, but that is nothing to feel elated over. And after a time Hannah may come hunting for me all by his lonesome. If he finds me—well, I'd be better off still dragging at the heels of the horse!"

During the time that Frank had been thinking of these things his strength was slowly returning to his

limbs and body. Although he remembered his failure to free his hands when he had made the attempt before, he resolved to try again and again as long as he was able to do so.

And then, to his surprise, he seemed to find that the rope about his wrists was loosened somewhat. In a vague way, it seemed that he remembered having been dragged through some sage brush, and of feeling a tug at his wrists—a tug that seemed to loosen his arms at the shoulders.

With wildly fluttering heart, Frank gradually set about trying to slip one of his hands out of the encircling rope. He found it slow and difficult work, but he proceeded carefully, fearing to tighten the rope and frustrate his own design if he gave a desperate pull.

And so, bit by bit, he worked his hand free, his heart bounding higher and higher as the prospect of success became more and more assured.

At last, with a low cry of joy, he freed his hands and sat up.

"Well, if this isn't a great deal better than being dead, I don't want any sugar in mine!" he laughed.

"That was a close call for you, Merriwell, and you are not out of the woods yet, but you are getting along."

He immediately set about clearing his feet, to which he found a long stretch of rope was still attached.

"Free!" he cried, at last. "Now, if I could get back to Morgan's ranch in time to spoil Black Jack's little plot to run off the horses to-night—well, the laugh would be on him."

But how was he to find his way to the ranch? And, even if he knew the proper direction to pursue, he was miles from the house, and he could not walk the distance in time to be on hand before the rustlers appeared.

When he had cleared his feet of the rope, he arose with no small difficulty, being stiff and sore in every limb. Once on his feet, he found he could scarcely stand.

"It's no use!" he cried. "I could not reach the ranch, even if it were near here!"

Frank was in despair, and it was some minutes before he could decide on anything. At last he resolved to keep moving, if he could do nothing more.

He reached down into the grass and mechanically gathered up the rope, scarcely knowing why he did so.

In the same mechanical manner he coiled it. Then, slowly and painfully, he walked away.

Frank had not gone far before a thought came to him. He knew he must still be on Morgan's ranch, and as the cattle king raised horses as well as cattle, he might come upon a herd of the animals.

"If I could capture one!" he exclaimed.

Then he stopped, and to the best of his ability, for all of the darkness, hastened to make a running noose in the rope in his hand.

Frank was fairly expert with a lariat, and he resolved to be ready for the emergency in case he was fortunate enough to stumble upon a herd of horses.

When he had prepared the noose he moved onward again.

Frank simply strayed in an aimless way across the plain, not having any idea as to the direction in which the ranch lay.

How long he wandered on in this manner he had no means of knowing. His strength had returned to him in a remarkable manner, and he felt that he would be in condition to make a battle for life if he were to happen upon the rustlers.

Of a sudden, in the darkness close at hand, something black and uncanny tossed its head, and there came a snort of alarm.

It was a horse!

Quick as thought, Frank swung the lariat about his head and made a cast, trusting to fortune more than to any skill he might possess, for the darkness was dense enough to baffle the most skillful "roper."

The moment he made the cast the boy threw his hands, holding the end of the rope to his hip, in the manner that he had seen cowboys do when they lassoed a horse or steer while on foot.

Barely was he in time for the shock that came. But he was braced and he stood there like a thing of iron.

Had Frank held the end of the rope in any other manner he would have been hurled to the ground in a moment. As it was, he withstood the shock, and the horse, which by the most wonderful luck he had noosed, was thrown.

Uttering a cry of triumph, the boy darted forward, flinging himself upon the horse, as the creature struggled up.

Frank was astride the animal's back when it gained its feet.

The horse was frightened, and away it dashed across the plain, bearing the boy through the dark night.

"Hurrah!" cried Merriwell, his delight bursting forth in a cheer. "Who says this is not luck? Here I am free and mounted on a swift horse, for the creature can run like the wind. Quite a change from my condition a short time ago!"

It was useless for him to try to guide or restrain the horse, and so he let the creature bear him whither it would, merely retaining his seat upon its back.

"Black Jack could not catch me now!" he laughed.

But one idea seemed to possess the frightened horse, and that was to try to run away from the lad upon its back.

It seemed that this wild ride continued for two hours, at least, and then of a sudden, close at hand in the darkness, loomed some buildings.

"A ranch!" thought Frank, with a throb of astonishment and joy.

Already the horse was well spent. It dashed straight up to a corral fence, and stopped suddenly.

Frank was off the horse in a moment. Before him he saw the gate of the corral standing wide open. He struck the horse a sharp blow with his hand, and the creature trotted into the corral, as if it were quite willing to do so.

"Seems to know the place," muttered Frank. "Acts as if it were glad to get back. It must be the horse has been confined in this same corral, and escaped by the open gate."

He closed the gate.

"Now," he muttered, "now to find out where I am."

As he turned about, dark forms appeared before him, and he heard the stern command:

"Up with your hands, critter! Try ter slope, an' we'll pump yer full o' lead!"

CHAPTER XXVI.

THE METAMORPHOSIS OF TESS.

"Up they go," said Frank, with a laugh, as he elevated his hands above his head. "You need not bother about shooting holes in me. I don't care for the lead cure."

There was an exclamation of astonishment, and a voice cried:

"Gorn of Habriel—I mean horn of Gabriel! if it isn't Frank Merriwell, I hope I may be butted to death by gross-eyed coats—no, cross-eyed goats!"

"You are right, Harry," said Frank, with satisfaction.

"I am here, large as life, and just as natural."

In another moment he was clasped in Rattleton's arms.

"I knew you would come back!" he declared, over and over. "But I was beginning to get anxious about you," he confessed. "That's how I happened to be out

here with these men. Couldn't sleep. Got up and came out."

"Where are the other fellows, Harry?" Frank asked.

"All asleep. Diamond told them you would come back all right, and was ready to turn in at the usual hour. Toots was tired out, and you know nothing causes Browning to lose his sleep."

"Well," said Merriwell, who found it difficult to realize that fickle fortune had turned thus completely in his favor, "I'll soon have them all out. I want to see Mr. Morgan without delay."

A short time later Frank was telling the cattle king of his remarkable adventures, and how he had learned that there was a plan to raid his horse-barn that very night.

"Well, we will give ther whelps a hot reception!" exclaimed Miles Morgan, as he hastily got into his clothes. "So Eli Grogan is Black Jack? I'll allow I'd never dreamed such a thing."

"Had Grogan a particular friend among the cowboys on the ranch?"

"Yes, two."

"Who?"

"Hannibal Jones was one."

"The other?"

"A chap hyar at ther stable by ther name of Blake."

"Take my advice and tie up this man Blake before he has time to learn that Black Jack's scheme is known."

"You think—just what?"

"He may be one of the rustlers. He may be the one left here to warn the gang in case anything is wrong at the ranch."

"Perhaps that's right. We'll look out for him, boy."

So it happened that Rod Blake suddenly found himself seized and bound, much to his astonishment and pretended indignation. The men who tied him refused to answer questions; he was placed where he could not by any possible effort signal to the rustlers.

Then there was haste in gathering the men about the ranch in the horse-barn, where they awaited the approach of the rustlers, all of them fully armed.

Barely were these preparations made when a sound from the darkness that hovered on the plain told the cattle lifters were approaching. With a rush and a

dash they swept up to the ranch, reached the barn, some leaped from the horses, while others held the animals.

Before they could rush forward to break into the barn, Morgan's cowboys poured a volley of bullets into the ranks of the astonished wretches.

Many fell, and those who could made haste to mount and ride madly away into the darkness, without returning a single shot. With wild yells, the triumphant cowboys rushed from the barn, seized the dead and wounded bandits, and bore them in.

It was found that Black Jack was among the killed, and Hannibal Jones was mortally wounded.

Jones stared as if he saw an apparition when his eyes rested on Frank.

"You?" he gasped. "Hyar? Wa-al, this yar gits me!"

"Yes, I am here," said Frank. "Thanks to your kindness in partly cutting the rope that attached me to the horse, I was able to reach the ranch in time to warn Mr. Morgan of the intended raid."

Hannah groaned.

"Thet time I cooked my own goose!" he huskily said. "I didn't want ther boss ter wipe yer out, fer I 'lowed

I hed first claim onter yer. Ef I'd let him do ther job, I wouldn't be hyar now with a bullet through my lungs."

"That's right," agreed Frank. "It was through no feeling of pity for me that you cut the rope. Instead of that, it was because you wanted the murderous satisfaction of killing me yourself. And this is your just reward."

"I reckon you're right, tenderfoot. I wants ter say before I shuffle off that you takes ther bakery fer anything in ther tenderfoot line. I never saw anything in Kansas afore that could stack up with you, kid."

Frank bade the men see that Hannah was made comfortable while he lived—as comfortable as possible. Some of the indignant cowboys were inclined to hang Jones and the other wounded ones, but Miles Morgan sternly forbade anything of the kind.

When the boys and the cattle king returned to the house, Tess was up and dressed. She regarded the lads with some astonishment, as she asked what all the shooting was about.

"Oh, not much!" smiled Frank. "We have been having a matinée with the rustlers, that is all."

She lifted her eyebrows.

"Ef yer means by that as how ye've been fightin'," she said, "I reckon ther punchers done ther fightin', while you was hid somewhere out o' ther reach o' bullets."

This seemed to amuse Frank, who smilingly said: "It is plain that your poor opinion of a tenderfoot has not changed in the least, Miss Morgan. However, it is of no consequence to me."

This thrust went home, as he plainly saw, for, with a saucy toss of her head and a pert retort, she hastily retired.

The following morning Tess came to breakfast in a gown that was a revelation to the boys, as it was quite as tasty and delicate as an Eastern girl of culture could have worn.

But what astonished them more than anything else was the fact that she seemed to have changed her manners with her gown.

That was not all. She had abandoned the uncouth Western style of speaking, had quite dropped the dialect of the ranches and the mountains, and spoke with

as perfect pronunciation as the most blue-blooded Boston maiden.

It was with no small amount of difficulty that Frank Merriwell could keep from staring at her. The change was so great and marvelous. She greeted them all with the greatest ease and grace.

Elmer Morgan was on hand, and he regarded his sister with great satisfaction.

"There, my deah girl," he drawled, "I am verwy glad you have decided to dwess like a civilized cwecher this mawning, don't yer 'now."

Then he turned to the boys, and added:

"My—aw—sistaw is very queer about some things, don't yer see. Fawther wesolved that we should be educated in the East. I went to Hawvard, and she attended Vassaw, but when she is heah at home she is a wegular wanch girl, don't yer undawstand. She will—aw—persist in dwessing in those wude clothes, and widing awound with the horrid cowboys. Then she weally delights to tawk like the punchaws, don't yer 'now."

Educated at Vassar! Why, Frank had thought the day before that Tess had not been educated at all. She

had seemed wild and rough, although she was strangely piquant and bewitching in her manner. Now she was actually handsome, although something of the old saucy air hovered about her.

It seemed that the girl was able to read Merriwell's thoughts, for a faint smile hovered about the corners of her pretty lips, and she gently observed:

"You seem surprised, Mr. Merriwell. I fancy you thought you had found a curiosity in me, and you are somewhat disappointed."

"Not disappointed, Miss Morgan—delighted, I assure you. You were charming as a ranch girl; but you are bewildering as a Vassar maiden."

"Very pretty, sir!" laughed Tess. "Surely you know how to make complimentary speeches, if you are a tenderfoot. And they say you actually rode Demon. How far did he carry you before he threw you off and got away?"

"He did not throw me off at all. And, as for getting away, I think you will find him in the breaking-corral when you look there this morning."

"Is it possible?"

Jack Diamond laughed in a quiet way.

"I told your father, Miss Morgan," he said, "that Frank would bring the horse back, but Mr. Morgan seemed to think such a thing beyond the range of possibility."

"No wonder. And is the horse in the corral, father? Did Mr. Merriwell bring Demon back?"

"Well," admitted the cattle king, "whether Mr. Merriwell brought Demon back or not, Demon is in the breaking-corral."

Tess was silent a moment, and then she suddenly said:

"Mr. Merriwell, I believe it is my duty to offer you an apology; but I will admit you are the most remarkable tenderfoot I ever saw. I have not held a very exalted opinion of college fellows, but it may be that I have deceived myself."

The breakfast was a merry one, for Miles Morgan did his best to make it such, and the lads were in a jolly mood. Without at all losing her air of grace and dignity, Tess laughed and chatted, betraying a natural turn for bright repartee and witty sayings. Frank was charmed with her appearance, and his face, his eyes, his voice betrayed as much.

Mr. Morgan did not see fit to put a "damper" on the pleasant occasion by mentioning the fact that Hannah, the cowboy-rustler, had "cashed in his chips" during the night, and would be buried, along with the other rustlers shot during the brief engagement, if it could be so called, some time that day.

After breakfast, Tess invited the boys into the parlor, which, to their fresh surprise, they found furnished and decorated in a manner that would not have been unworthy of some Eastern mansions.

In the parlor was a splendid upright rosewood piano, and in Tess' collection of music were a number of the very latest popular songs.

The girl was induced to play and sing, and it quickly became evident that her musical education had not been neglected, while she had a sweet and sympathetic voice, that was also strong and clear as the note of a bell.

After singing a number of popular songs, she brought out a book of college songs, and invited the boys to sing with her. This they were pleased to do,

and the house echoed to the sound of "Upidee," "Bingo," "Solomon Levi," "Uralio," and "Stars of the Summer Night."

The following morning at daybreak the boys left the ranch on their way toward the West.

CHAPTER XXVII.

THE STRUGGLE IN THE STAGE.

"There is something wrong inside that stage, fellows," cried Frank.

"You are rust jite—I mean just right!" came from Harry.

"There is some sort of struggle going on," Jack declared. "Did you hear that? I believe it was a woman's voice!"

"Land ob wartermillions!" gurgled Toots, the colored boy. "Nebber see no such country as dis am fo' trouble! 'Fi ebber git back to de East wif mah scalp, I's gwan teh be a mighty lucky coon. I is!"

"Huah!" grunted Bruce. "Don't worry about your scalp. Wool is too cheap out here for any one to care for that crop of yours."

"Mebbe yo' think dat am smart, sar! G'won, boy! yo's too tiard teh think ob a smart thing teh say, sar."

"Surely there is a struggle taking place in the stage!"

exclaimed Merriwell. Then he lifted his voice, and cried :

“Oh, driver! Hello, there! Hold on, will you! Stop a minute!”

The driver did not turn his head. His whip swung through the air, the long lash writhing like a snake, to then shoot forward and crack with a pistol-like report near the ears of the horses.

The animals were dashing forward at reckless speed, and the coach was swaying and rocking and bounding on its strap-springs of leather.

Again Frank hailed :

“Hello! hello! hello! Hold up, driver! What’s the matter with you? Are your ears plugged up?”

Still the driver faced straight ahead, without appearing to hear the cry.

“That’s queer,” commented Diamond.

“It’s andering thuggravating—I mean thundering aggravating!” burst from Rattleton. “Of course he heard you, Frank.”

“Perhaps not.”

“Why, he must have heard!”

“It is possible he is deaf.”

"It may be, but I don't believe it."

The boys were mounted on their bicycles, which enabled them to keep close behind the mountain stage.

Already they were in the Rocky Mountains, riding along a valley of the foothills, with the great range rising in all its appalling and awesome grandeur almost above their very heads.

They had passed through Denver, where no adventure worthy of note had befallen them; and now came the most serious and dangerous part of their trip across the continent—crossing the Great Divide.

On the great plains of the West they had found the facilities for cycling surprisingly good, and, although but a little more than halfway from New York to San Francisco, they were in the best of spirits, feeling sure they would accomplish the trip, for all of the fact that friends and acquaintances had prophesied to the contrary at the outset.

The stage road to Buzzardsville, a small place amid the mountains, was rough and treacherous, being full of loose stones, and yet they had made very good time over it.

Coming up behind the stage, they had observed the

evident commotion within, and, above the rumbling wheels, had heard the hoarse voice of a man, mingled with what seemed to be the frightened cries of a woman.

"I'll tell you how we may be able to attract the attention of the driver," said Frank.

"That's right, tell us!" exclaimed the young Virginian.

"We will shout at him all together when I give the signal. How does that go?"

"We can try it. Let 'er go."

"All ready. Now—one, two, three!"

Then they sent up a great shout that was flung back in a hundred echoes from all sides, but did not seem to disturb the man on the box of the stage any more than a whisper.

However, from within the stage, there came a distinct cry.

"Help!"

It was plain enough for all the boys to hear, and it caused their blood to leap more swiftly in their veins.

"Jack and Harry," said Frank, swiftly, "at the first opportunity, you are to ride ahead and try to stop

those horses, while Bruce and I will ride alongside the stage, and see what we can do. I am satisfied there is something wrong here."

"Grasush sakes teh goodness!" gasped the colored boy. "Heah am anodder row, jes' as suah as I'm a libbin' niggah!"

"What if the driver thinks we are trying to hold up the stage?" asked Browning.

"In that case, he might take a fancy to fill us with bullets," Diamond answered. "We'll have to chance it."

"Gre't gov-nah!" burst from Toots. "Don' yo' boys go teh gittin' yoahselves killed dead. What am I gwan teh do if yo' all gits killed?"

"If the driver offers to shoot at us, it will be your duty to shoot him," said Frank.

"But I ain't got no pistol, Marser Frank, an' I nebber'd dar shoot one off if I did hab it."

At this moment there came an opportunity for carrying out Frank's plan, and he gave the signal. Immediately Jack and Harry dashed ahead, passing the stage, one on either side, and soon were beside the horses.

With the utmost daring, for all of a warning cry from the driver, the boys caught the horses by the bits, doing their best to stop them.

"Leggo, thar!" roared the driver, rising to his feet. "Leggo, ur I'll be derved ef I don't bore yer both!"

"If you try it, there is a man behind who will drop you in a moment," declared Diamond. "He has you covered now."

In great alarm, the driver swiftly turned, ready to fling up his hands if the boy's words were true. In fact, he turned so suddenly that he lost his balance, reeled, clutched at the air, and, still clinging to the reins, fell from the boot to the ground.

At the same time, the boys made an extra effort to check the horses.

Frank and Bruce succeeded in riding along by the side of the stage, and Merriwell looked in at one of the windows.

He was surprised to see that one of the passengers was a girl of seventeen or eighteen, and that she was engaged in a fierce struggle with a man of twenty-four or twenty-five.

"Release her, you ruffian!" shouted Frank, trying to

get hold of the man by reaching through the open window, but failing in the attempt.

"Help!" screamed the girl, turning a pair of wildly appealing eyes toward the young college lad. "Save me!"

"I will!" Frank gallantly assured.

Fierce exclamations of anger broke from the lips of the man, but he still clung to the girl.

"You villain!" rang out Merriwell's clear voice. "You deserve to be whipped at the post!"

At this moment the driver took his tumble from the stage, and, as he held the reins, it was not long before the horses were brought to a stand, with Harry and Jack clinging at their heads.

Frank leaped down from his wheel, which he dropped immediately, and flung open the door of the coach.

He did not find it necessary to interfere to rescue the girl from the clutches of the man, as she had freed herself, and came leaping to the ground, holding a blood-stained hatpin in her grasp.

The man followed her, clinging to his left hand, from which the blood was dropping. His face was white with rage, and his eyes glared.

The girl grasped Merriwell by the arm, wildly crying:

"Don't let him touch me again!"

"Never fear," said the young athlete, reassuringly; "he shall not put his hands upon you, miss."

"You can't stop me, you meddlesome nobody," snarled the man.

"Try it, and see."

"Oh, he has deceived me! He insulted me! He has lied to me! He is a wretch and a villain!"

The girl was almost hysterical.

"She is my sister," declared the man. "She has had trouble that has turned her brain, and she thinks I mean her an injury. I am here to take care of her, and I shall do it."

Then he advanced and placed his hand roughly on the shoulder of the shrinking, shuddering girl.

A moment later something struck him. It was a blow from Frank, and was hard enough to hurl the young man back into the open door of the stage.

Then Frank turned his attention to the girl, who was in a half-fainting condition.

"I trust you are not harmed, miss?" he cried, as he

hastened to support her. "The scoundrel shall not molest you again, you may be sure."

"Oh, the wretch!" she panted. "And to think I trusted him—I believed the villain!"

"If he has harmed you, he shall suffer for it!"

"He insulted me by trying to kiss me. When he was determined that he would kiss me, I struck him in the face, and it made him furious. And the driver—I know he heard me call!"

"The driver seems to be deaf."

"He is not."

"Then he made a pretty bluff at it."

"I believe the scoundrel Jutland paid him to give no attention to my calls! I am sure of it!"

"Oh-ho! Was that the trick? Well, there may be a score to settle with Mr. Driver!"

"There is a score to settle with you, you meddling fool!" snarled a voice in Merriwell's ear.

Then Frank was clutched from behind by a pair of powerful hands, strong fingers closed on his throat, and he was held in a vise-like grip.

Struggle as he might, Frank soon found he could not break that powerful grasp. He was held fast,

while those fingers seemed to be crushing the bones of his neck, which cracked beneath the pressure.

The boy could not even gasp for breath. A roaring sound filled his head, and shadows danced before his eyes. He realized that he was growing weaker and weaker, and then——

“Well, it seems to me that I’d better take a hand in this,” said the slow, deliberate, lazy voice of Bruce.

Bruce had come around the stage in time to discover what was taking place, and he proceeded to lay his hands on Merriwell’s assailant.

Now in the old days, before he acquired a superfluity of flesh, Browning had been one of the great athletes and strong men of Yale. In strength he was regarded as something of a wonder, but he had grown too lazy to exert himself.

The bicycle trip had reduced Bruce’s flesh to a certain extent, and had put him back into condition, so that really he was stronger than ever before in all his life, although he was not aware of it himself, as he had not been given a good opportunity to exert himself.

Browning was a very non-excitable person, and everything he did was done with great deliberation.

Therefore, with great deliberation, he took hold of Frank Merriwell's assailant.

But when Bruce had taken hold of the fellow, that person realized he was not dealing with a baby.

"If I were in your place," murmured Bruce, "I would break away."

Then, with ease and moderation, he broke the fellow's hold on Frank. Having done this, Browning slowly shook the man, and still, for all of that slowness, he made the scoundrel's teeth snap together and caused him to gasp for breath.

"I feel just like doing something real rough to you, sir," said the big bicyclist. "Don't you know, I think you deserve a genuine thrashing, and I'd give it to you, too, if it wasn't such a confounded bother."

With a howl of rage, the fellow drew back his fist to strike Bruce, but Browning caught the blow midway in delivery, seizing the man's wrist, and stopping it there.

"You seem to be very violent, sir," observed the big fellow. "Your heart may be strong and regular, but still it is not advisable for you to become too excited. There's no telling what might result."

The man gasped for breath. He was strong himself, but this young giant seemed to handle him with the greatest ease, and it took the sand out of him very quickly.

"Let go!" he hissed. "I will kill you!"

"If you should do that in a fit of passion," said Bruce, "you would be hanged, and you know hanging is very unhealthy."

An inarticulate discord of words came from the throat of the furious man, but he did not seek to carry on the struggle with Browning.

"Excuse me," said Browning, with a sober shake of the head, "I do not understand you. I know a little French, some Latin and Greek, and can say *carramba*, in Spanish, but that is pretty near my limit. After thinking the matter over, I don't know as I care a rap whether I understand you or not. All I want is that you understand me, and it will be a mighty good thing for you if you do. I am going to give you some advice. Never bother young ladies who do not care to have you bother them, and don't try to choke any of my friends, because the next time you make such an attempt I'll take you down so hard you'll know when

you strike the ground. Now I am going to let you go, and if you have any sense left in your head you'll hold on hard and try to behave. If you have any shooting-irons around your person or any implements to cut with, keep them out of your hands, and you won't get hurt. That's all."

With that, Bruce gave the fellow a toss and a push that sent him reeling, to fall sprawling on his hands and knees. Then the big fellow turned and found Frank again looking out for the girl.

"That's just like him!" murmured the big college lad. "He always freezes onto anything first class, and that girl is a queen!"

The light of admiration in Browning's eyes grew stronger and stronger as he continued to regard the girl, who was really strikingly handsome.

"I don't know but I should have let the fellow choke Merriwell a little longer," said Bruce, sadly. "Then he might have put Merry out of the ring long enough for me to have a show."

CHAPTER XXVIII.

A WAR OF WORDS.

In the meantime, Rattleton had taken charge of the horses, while Diamond was looking after the driver, who was somewhat injured by his fall.

Toots had kept in the background till the fighting seemed to be over, and then he came rushing forward, his fists clinched, and a look of savage determination on his black face.

"Heah I is, Marser Frank!" he shouted. "I's reddy teh stan' by yo' jes' as long as dar am a drop of bref lef' in mah boady! An' I want all belligerous-minded pussons teh understan' I's a mighty bad niggah when I's riled. I—I carries concealed weppuns all ovah mah pusson, an' I's mighty reckless 'bout der way I uses 'em. I's sight mo' danger'us dan a blue-gum nigger, I is."

Bruce stretched out his hand and caught the "dangerous" darky by the shoulder.

"Hold on," he said. "Don't bother Frank now.

Don't you see you are interrupting the harmony of the occasion?"

"Wh-wh-whar? Oh, land ob watermillions! He! he! he! Dat am jes' lek Marser Frank! All der gals dead sho' teh git stuck on him. Don' none ob you odder chaps stan' no show at all w'en he's 'roun'?"

"That's right," sighed Bruce. "The only way for us to get a show is to extinguish him."

"Yo' can't distinguish dat boy—no, sar! He allus comes right out on de top ob de heap."

The man whom Bruce had handled so cleverly and easily had risen to his feet, and he now advanced toward Merriwell.

Immediately Browning released Toots, and placed himself in the way of the young ruffian, calmly saying:

"I wouldn't bother him just now, if I were you. He's very busy. Besides that, you'll not be lucky enough to get hold of him from behind again, and he is liable to break your jaw if you make it necessary for him to hit you a second time."

"I want him to let my sister alone!"

"Your sister?"

"Yes, my sister."

"Do you claim that young lady as your sister?"

"I do."

"Well, sir, to the best of my judgment, you are a confounded liar. I trust you will pardon me if I am mistaken."

"That girl is my sister, who is slightly deranged at times. I was trying to calm her when——"

Browning made a languid gesture of protest.

"It won't go down, sir," he yawned. "You do not look at all alike, and I see no symptoms of insanity about the young lady. You should have invented something better."

The fellow turned almost livid.

"Get out of my way!" he snarled. "If you don't, I'll—I'll——"

"Well, what will you do?" slowly asked the big fellow.

"I'll make you suffer for this unwarranted and insolent interference! I'll have you all arrested!"

"Oh, well, I think we'll have to take our chances of arrest. I am willing to chance it. Simmer down, old fellow. Put yourself on ice. You are overheated."

The man had been bewildered by the easy manner

in which Bruce had handled him, and there was something in the big fellow's air of lazy confidence that convinced him it would not be a good thing to carry matters too far.

"All right!" he grated. "But you'll be sorry."

The girl had seen Browning coolly face the young villain, and she had heard all that passed between the two.

"Do not believe him!" she now cried, scornfully regarding the man with whom she had struggled. "His name is Joe Jutland, and he is in no way related to me. He has deceived my brother. I believe he has killed my brother!"

"One of her crazy notions!" declared the man. "Some way her head has become filled with the idea that I am dead."

"You are not dead, but I fear poor Paul, who trusted you and believed in your bogus mining scheme, is dead. I believe you killed him for his money, Joe Jutland!"

The man shook his head in a sober manner, as if he felt sorry for the girl.

"It's too bad!" he muttered. "I am afraid she'll never be right in her head again. Poor Mabel!"

That seemed to arouse the girl still more, and her dark eyes expressed the intense scorn which her lips could not utter.

"If I am Mabel, who are you?" she asked.

As if she hoped she would recognize him, the man held out his hands appealingly, saying:

"I am Paul—Paul Harding, your brother, Mabel. Joe Jutland has not harmed me. Be reasonable, Mabel. Jutland may be hundreds of miles from here now, for all that I know. I do not know what has become of him."

The look of scorn on her face seemed to give way to one of astonishment, and she regarded the man in doubt, as Browning plainly saw.

"I believe you are the one who is crazy!" cried the girl. "If not, you are a born actor, and I never fancied you that, Jutland."

The man made a gesture of despair.

"Why will you persist in calling me that?" he exclaimed. "Look at me, Mabel. Surely you must recognize me now."

She turned away, saying to Frank:

"I am afraid of him. He really seems to be trying to make me believe he is my brother."

"But he is not?"

"No! no! no! He lured my brother here into the mountains, led him to bring along all the money he had in the world, which was about twenty-five hundred dollars, and now I believe he has destroyed poor Paul for that money. I wrote to Paul, but received no answer from him. After a time—after I had written many times, I received a letter from that wretch, saying my brother was very ill, likely to die, and was calling for me. If Paul did not have a woman to care for him, he might die, and I was the one woman he needed. I wrote that I was coming, and he met me in Denver. Although I never trusted Joe Jutland, I did not dream he was lying to me till less than an hour ago. Then, when he was trying to make love to me, it came over me like a flash, and I told him he had lied. He denied it, but I saw by his face that I had hit the truth. My heart was filled with horror and loathing of him, but what could I do. I was——"

"Haven't you heard enough to convince you that she is deranged?" cried the man.

At this moment Jack Diamond and the stage driver came around from the opposite side of the coach, the latter hobbling along with some difficulty.

"I say, Harding," said the veteran of the reins, addressing the man who claimed to be the girl's brother, "whatever is all this yar racket about, anyway?"

Stepping close to the driver, the man raised his voice, and shouted:

"It is all because Mabel does not recognize me. She thinks I am trying to injure her in some way. She grew frantic in the stage, and was determined that she would jump out. When I tried to hold her, she struck me in the hand with her hatpin. Look here, see where she drove the pin into my hand."

He held up the wounded member for the driver to see.

"Wa-al, may I be derved!" exclaimed the Jehu. "An' I never knowed anything about it! She wuz all right w'en yer brought her onter ther stage. W'at made her git off ag'in?"

"Oh, I don't know! It came upon her suddenly."

"Poor gal!"

The boys exchanged looks.

"Do not believe them—do not believe those men?" cried the girl, in a sudden outburst of terror. "It is a vile plot! They are carrying it out together! They are trying to deceive you into believing I am really crazy! Please do not believe them!"

"Do not be afraid, Miss Harding," said Frank, quietly. "You may be sure they will not succeed in deceiving us a great deal. This man who says he is your brother will have to prove it before we turn you over to him."

"That's dead right," said Browning, with attempted gallantry, and then blushed crimson at his own boldness.

The girl gave Bruce a grateful look, which made him blush still more and turn away with haste.

"What a noble fellow he is!" she murmured.

"Who?" exclaimed Frank, in surprise. "Browning?"

"Your friend who handled Joe Jutland so easily."

"That's Bruce Browning, and you bet he is all right!" said Frank, with more heartiness than ele-

gance. "He was born tired, but a whiter fellow never lived."

The driver and his male passenger were talking together, the latter speaking his words very loudly, for all of which it occasionally happened that the driver asked him to repeat something.

Truly it seemed that the driver was deaf, for all that the girl had declared that he was not.

"She must have been mistaken as to that," decided Merriwell, although he did not speak the words aloud.

"Miss Harding," said Frank, "if you will step into the stage, I will see that you are not molested further."

"Oh, no!" she exclaimed. "I'll not ride another mile with that wretch! I would not do it for anything!"

"You shall not."

"But how can I avoid it?"

"He shall not enter the stage with you."

"What will you do with him?"

"I think we'll let him walk."

"All the way to Buzzardville?"

"That can't be far now. You are to stop in Buzzardville?"

"I suppose I'll have to stop there to-night. He led me to think I'd find Paul there."

"Well, we will follow close behind the stage on our wheels, and you need not fear anything."

"You are very kind, and I am fortunate to find such friends at such a time. I don't know what I should have done."

"We were fortunate to be on hand to befriend you, Miss Harding."

She could not help noticing the clever manner in which he said this, and then her eyes wandered to the massive figure of Bruce Browning, who was leaning against a wheel of the stage, coolly listening to the conversation between the driver and the male passenger. Browning seemed quite comfortable and unconcerned, for all of anything that had happened.

Even as she looked, Bruce produced a cigarette case, took out a "stick," rolled it slowly, pinched out a little tobacco from the end, moistened the paper with his lips, and then lighted it.

This was done with a certain air of languid carelessness that was characteristic of the fellow; but scarcely had he lighted the cigarette when he saw the

girl was watching him, and he deliberately proceeded to remove it from his lips and throw it away.

Frank persuaded Miss Harding to enter the stage, and Bruce rather awkwardly lifted his cap to her as she was assisted in by Merriwell.

Immediately the man who had claimed to be her brother sought to follow her, but Browning's hand fell on his shoulder, and the big fellow said:

"Don't."

"What's that?" cried the man. "Don't try to stop me. I have a right to look after my sister!"

"That's true, and you may go look after her, if you have one; but you'll have to let this young lady alone."

"I have paid my passage on this stage."

"That's too bad, for it doesn't seem to me that you will be able to travel any farther by it to-night."

"Do you mean that you will dare prevent me from going to Buzzardsville by this stage?" frothed the fellow.

"That is exactly what we mean," said Frank. "You have forfeited your right to ride with this young lady by your actions, and so you will have to walk."

The man ground his teeth in fury.

"Oh, you shall suffer for this—all of you!" he panted. "You will find I have friends in Buzzardsville."

"Let it go at that. If we get into trouble, we'll have to take our medicine. Bruce, look out for this fine gentleman, while the rest of us get our wheels on the top of the coach. I have decided that we'll ride into town on the stage, as this road is rather rough."

"What's that?" shouted the driver, as if he did not fully understand, and still had caught a portion of Merriwell's words. "Whatever do you propose ter do?"

"We are going along with you as passengers, my dear sir," cried Frank. "You will find us very pleasant company."

"And they are going to leave me to walk, Hunk," yelled the man who had been a passenger.

"They can't do that. I won't let 'em."

"We'll see," quietly smiled Frank, as he set Harry and Toots to getting the wheels to the top of the stage.

"Ye'll hev ter pay," declared Budd Hunk.

"We will pay, and one of us will show you how to

drive, uncle," laughed Merriwell. "You were injured by your fall, and you are not in the best condition to handle the reins. Diamond, will you look out for that part of the job?"

"I shall take great delight in doing so," said Jack, gravely, a look of satisfaction on his face.

"Hey? hey?" shouted the driver, in consternation. "W'at's that ye're going ter try ter do? Derved ef I'll hev it!"

But Mr. Hunk was not able to prevent it, as the boys proceeded to carry out Frank's directions to the letter.

Railing fiercely at the lads, the man who claimed to be Mabel Harding's brother was left behind when the stage rolled on toward Buzzardsville.

Frank was within the stage, chatting with the girl, while the driver looked on with astonishment, as Jack Diamond drove.

Rattleton and Browning made themselves comfortable on the outside. Harry enjoyed it fully, but Browning seemed singularly restless. Finally he said:

"I'll be hanged if I think much of it!"

"Think much of what?" asked Rattleton. "Why, you lazy dog, don't you like this better than pushing a wheel over such a beastly road?"

"I don't mean that."

"Eh? No?"

"No."

"Then what do you mean?"

"The way Merry is taking charge of all the pretty girls we meet. He hasn't given anybody else a show since we left New York."

"Oh! so that is what is troubling you? Well, I really believe you are smitten with Miss Harding! You—you? Is it possible? Ha! ha! ha!"

"I fail to see what there is so funny about it," growled Bruce.

"Funny? Why, the very idea that you should get stuck on a girl at all is funny! Oh, you big, fat rascal!"

"Now stop that!" came in disgust from Browning. "I am not fat any more, and you know it. I have worked all the flesh off, and what there is left is pure muscle. And as for getting stuck on a girl—well, I rather fancy I have a right."

"Well, jes' yo' git stuck, boy, an' dat am all de good it'll do yeh w'en Marser Frank's 'roun'," chuckled Toots.

"Some day something will happen to 'Marser Frank'," muttered Bruce.

"Wh-wh-what's dat? What's gwine teh happen, sar?"

"Well, there will be a whole lot of people marching slow behind him, and he won't know anything about it."

"G'won dar, boy! Don' yo' get too free wid yo' swinuations, sar. If yo' boddere wid dat boy, yo'll be de one, sar. Dar'll be a whole lot ob people singin' at yo' house, an' yo' won't heah 'em. Somebody'll cay-arve yo' name on a stone sho'tly after yo' boddere wid dat boy, sar. Yah! yah! yah!"

Toots' high-pitched laugh awoke the echoes.

CHAPTER XXIX.

IN BUZZARDSVILLE.

Buzzardsville was a place of not more than a dozen houses and one large building that was a general store, saloon, post office and hotel combined.

The stage whirled into town and drew up before the hotel, Jack Diamond still driving, while Budd Hunk sat at his side.

Fifteen or twenty rough-looking men, nearly all of them smoking black pipes or chewing tobacco, were standing in front of the hotel, awaiting the arrival of the stage, which was overdue.

These men stared in no little wonder at the youthful driver.

"Dern my boots!" exclaimed one. "Whatever does this.yar mean?"

"It's a tenderfoot-lookin' critter as is handlin' the reins," said another. "An' Hunk is settin' beside him. Somethin' must be th' matter with Budd, else he'd never let a youngster like that drive inter town."

"Look at t'other ones on top th' stage!" cried a third. "They're all dressed alike! An' w'at's them things on ther stage?"

"Bisuckles!" exclaimed the man who seemed somewhat familiar with such things. "Them fellers are bisuckle riders."

"One of em's a nigger!"

"Sure pop!"

"What?" cried a big man, in astonishment; "do they let niggers ride on bisuckles? That yar proves they ain't got no real refinement in ther East. He's made a mistake comin' out hyar, fer somebody'll shoot lead inter him w'en he's ridin' th' thing."

The manner in which Diamond brought the stage to a stop in front of the hotel brought a few grunts of admiration from the witnesses.

Budd Hunk had always claimed the honor of opening the door of his stage, but now one of the boys leaped down and did this for him.

Then the spectators grunted again, for Frank stepped out and assisted a very pretty girl to alight.

Hunk, who had been hurt by his fall more than he supposed, was aided to the ground by the boys, and

then some of the men who knew him helped him into the hotel, while the others questioned him and the bicycle boys.

The bicycles were removed from the top of the coach and taken into the hotel. The mail bag had been thrown off and turned over to the postmaster.

Frank applied for the best room in the house, saying that it was for Miss Harding. He was able to obtain the front room directly over the entrance to the place.

It was late in the afternoon, and the boys decided to remain in Buzzardsville overnight, so they sought accommodations for themselves.

It was well that they had anticipated roughing it, for the accommodations were of the very poorest order. Toots, however, was the only one who complained.

"Dis ain't no place fo' a gemman," he declared. "It may do for po' white trash, but what we want is 'commodations fo' gemmans."

"Perhaps you had better not say too much about that," warned Rattleton. "It might wound the feel-

ings of some of the citizens, and you are aware that Western people act very rudely when they are angry."

"Dat am right," admitted the colored boy. "I rud-deh guess I'll keep mah mouf shet. I don' car' fo' no mo' trouble."

So Toots subsided.

Frank registered for Miss Harding. When he had written the girl's name, the proprietor of the hotel looked at the brown-paper cashbook that served as a register, and seemed somewhat surprised.

"Harding?" he said. "Why, I don't allow she can be relation to the Harding who has been 'round yere fer some time?"

"I don't know about that," said Frank. "She has a brother, whose name is Paul."

"I reckon that's him," said the hotel-keeper.

"Where is Mr. Harding now?"

"Wa-al, he went East on business a few days ago. Allowed as how he might visit Denver."

"Did he have a friend or acquaintance by the name of Jutland while in this town?"

"Jutland? No, sir; never heard of no Jutland. Harding wuz on his own hook, and he 'lowed thar wuz

a chance o' makin' a strike somewhar 'round yere, 'though I never knowed jest why he thought so. He's ruther queer, anyhow."

"Can you describe him?" asked Frank.

"Wa-all, I dunno. He's a tenderfoot, fer he will stick ter dressin' 'most o' ther time w'en 'round town, though he does wear old clothes and boots sometimes. Is med'um built, with dark hair an' mustache, an' has a blue scar on one of his wrists—I've fergot which one. That's 'bout all the describin' of him I kin do."

"Miss Harding is in search of her brother."

"Wa'al, it's too bad she got hyar jest in time ter miss him, but he's comin' back, I'm certun. Ther best thing fer her ter do is ter stay hyar till he shows up."

Then the man questioned Frank about himself and the other boys, and great was his astonishment when he learned that the boys had ridden from New York on their bicycles, being bound for San Francisco.

Frank said nothing about the encounter with the stranger whom the girl called Jutland, knowing well enough that Hunk would tell of that.

But to the surprise of the boys, after taking several drinks at the bar and getting something to eat, Hunk

came out, mounted to the box and drove off, the horses having been exchanged for fresh ones in the meantime.

Later on, however, it seemed evident that the driver had said something about his unwelcome passengers, for the boys found they were regarded with suspicion, not to say aversion, by the rough men, among whom there was considerable talking on the side.

Frank's quick eyes were the first to note this, but he said nothing till some of the others had mentioned it, then he laughed, observing:

"They do not seem to like the looks of us for some reason. Never mind; I can't say I am stuck on their looks, myself. We'll keep still and mind our own business, and I don't think we'll get into any great trouble."

The lads had seen a few mining camps to the northwest, and Buzzardsville did not interest them much. Besides that, they were tired, so they did not wander around, but remained near the hotel.

Among the men who lingered about the bar was a fellow known as Handsome Bob. It was apparent at

a glance that he had been called "handsome" because he was the ugliest and homeliest man in the town.

Handsome Bob was drinking freely, and he seemed to regard the boys with a great deal of dislike. He was heard to speak in the most disrespectful terms of all "tenderfeet," but not one of the youthful cyclists paid any attention to him.

Experience had warned the boys to shun men of Handsome Bob's stamp.

Through Frank's attentiveness, it was arranged that Miss Harding's supper should be served in her room, although such a thing had never before been heard of in Buzzardsville.

Supper time came and the boys dined at the regular table with the other "guests," who were rough and tough in every sense of the expression.

A jolly time they had of it, for they cracked jokes among themselves, paying no attention to the persons they did not know at the table.

"I say," cried Harry, "Browning's appetite doesn't seem to be going back on him. It is all right."

"I have heard," came gravely from Frank, "that Browning eats all his meals before a mirror when he

can do so, as it makes him think he is eating twice as much."

"Yah! yah! yah!" cackled Toots, who was determined to show his appreciation of anything Frank said.

"Oh, my!" grunted Bruce. "I wish you would send that laugh out to the kitchen and have it boiled."

"Huah!" came from the colored lad. "Mebbe yo' finks dat's funny! G'way, boy! Yo' ain't got no fine sense ob humor nohow. Yo' jes' shows yeh ignerence when yo' opens dat mouf."

"That's right, Toots," nodded Rattleton. "He wouldn't know a real joke if he saw it in London *Punch*. He's too slow."

"Suttainly he am, Mistah Rattleton—suttainly. He am so slow he couldn't ketch a cough. Besides dat," declared the darky, with a queer look on his face, "he don' hab no right teh be so free wif me. I's got some relatives dat move in de highest society, I has."

"Is that so?"

"Yes, sar; dey're pianner movahs, sah."

"Well, that is pretty good for you, Toots," laughed Frank.

"Oh, I's a swift nigger, yo' bet," crowed the colored boy, and then he laughed again.

"What are those?" asked Frank, pointing to some things served in on a large platter.

"Those!" cried Rattleton, with a stage air—"those, me boy, are sausages."

"You don't say!" murmured Frank, as if awe-stricken. "I think they should be vaccinated. They do not look healthy."

"The last time I ate sausages," said Bruce, in his deliberate way, "was the year before I entered college. That year I went abroad with my indulgent parents. As you all know, I am very generous and something of a philosopher. 'The Good Book says, 'Cast your bread on the waters,' and so forth. Well, I wasn't thinking so much about that at the time, but we'd eaten sausages for dinner—that is, I had. After a while, I went on deck. It was very dark, and the ship seemed nervous and restless. Then I—well, I followed the directions of the Good Book. As I was leaning over the rail, a young lady came out of the cabin, and said, 'Excuse me, is the moon up yet?' 'I

don't know, miss,' I replied; 'but it is if I've swallowed it.' "

This was told in the big fellow's lazy, inimitable way, and it brought a laugh from some of the regular guests.

In the midst of the joking and laughing a man came bolting into the dining-room, stopped suddenly and stared at the boys.

It was the fellow who had insulted Miss Harding. He had just reached Buzzardsville, and his first work was to locate the young cyclists.

"He looks as if he is out for gore, Frank," said Diamond.

"Oh, I don't think he's very dangerous," came calmly from Merry.

Then the proprietor of the hotel entered by another door, and saw the man. Immediately he uttered an exclamation of satisfaction, and hurried toward the new arrival, crying:

"Hello, Harding! So ye're back from Denver? Wa-al, it's lucky, fer yer sister's hyar lookin' fer yer."

Then he fell to talking with the man, plainly telling him of the new arrivals in Buzzardsville.

"Well, what do you think of that, Merry?" asked Jack Diamond. "Do you tumble? The proprietor called him Harding."

"I heard it," said Frank, as he calmly continued eating.

"Well, what do you think?"

"It's a messed up mix—I mean a mixed up mess!" exclaimed Harry, a look of perplexity on his face.

"I have not decided yet," said Frank.

"Is it possible we have made a break?" asked Jack. "Is it possible the fellow is her brother, and told the truth when he said that she is insane?"

"She doesn't appear insane."

"Still it may be possible."

"Yes."

"That makes me tired!" said Browning, with astonishing energy. "It is utterly ridiculous, and you all know it! The girl is all right, and that fellow is crooked."

"But he is known here as Harding, and he claims to be Paul Harding, the girl's brother."

"I don't care if he is known as Harding, and what he

claims doesn't cut any ice. The girl is all right, and he is all wrong."

"Well, you are smashed on her!" laughed Harry. "And that's no idle dream. Oh, Brucie! Brucie!"

Bruce got up and left the table.

The landlord and the other man had disappeared through a door.

The other boys quickly finished eating, and followed Bruce.

He was not to be found.

"I wonder what has become of him?" speculated Frank, as they stood in front of the hotel.

At this moment a shrill scream came from the room occupied by Mabel Harding, followed immediately by the sounds of masculine voices.

Crash—jangle—jangle!

There was a breaking of glass, and a body came flying out through the window of the room, shot over the heads of the boys, and struck the ground. And then, with the light in the room revealing him distinctly, Bruce Browning was seen near the broken window, while the boys heard him speak in his lazy, drawling manner:

"Don't be at all alarmed, Miss Harding, for that individual will not trouble you any more at present. I made a slight mistake, and put him out of the window, instead of the door, but the window happened to be nearer."

"Wow!" gasped Rattleton. "I hope Bruce hasn't killed anybody! If he has, we're in a scrape sure!"

Without a word, Frank dashed into the hotel and ran up the stairs. The other boys hastened to where the man had fallen, and bent over him. The man groaned as they did so.

"Just as I thought!" came from Diamond. "It is the chap who claims to be her brother."

"Land ob goodness!" gurgled Toots. "Dis am awful!"

The scream and the crash had been heard all over the hotel, and a crowd quickly gathered. The man who had been thrown from the window was lifted and carried into the hotel.

At first it was thought that the fellow was badly injured, as there was blood on his face and hands, and he was breathing faintly; but he came around in a measure while the doctor of the camp was making an

examination of his wounds, and began to express his feelings in language that was decidedly violent.

"A fellow who can swear like that is not in danger of dying very soon," said Jack Diamond, with a breath of relief.

"Bress de Lawd!" came from Toots. "If dat po' white trash had died, dar's no tellin' what'd been de quonsequinces, no, sar!"

CHAPTER XXX.

BROWNING'S MOVE.

Finding the man was not likely to die from the fall, the boys started out to look for Browning and Merriwell.

Upon rushing upstairs to the room of the girl, Frank found Browning trying to calm the fears of Miss Harding, who was in a highly excited and almost hysterical condition.

"It's all right," the big college lad was saying. "He won't trouble you again, Miss Harding. In fact, I do not think he will bother you for some time to come."

"Oh, I hope you haven't killed him!" she shuddered. "That would be awful!"

"It's rather hard work to kill such rascals, I have noticed. They do not croak easily."

"What have you been up to, old man?" asked Merriwell, entering the room. "What have you done?"

"Oh, nothing worth mentioning," was Browning's cool reply. "I tossed a chap out of the window, that's

all. As I forgot to open the window, I broke some glass."

"But it is some distance from that window to the street, and a fall like that is liable to kill a man."

"If he dies, he'll escape the expense of feeding and clothing himself a few years longer, and so it'll be money in his pocket."

"But you'll be in trouble if he dies."

"Never mind, that's a small matter. He had forced himself in here on that young lady, and was annoying her. I was near when she screamed, and came right in without knocking. When I saw it was the same chap who gave her the trouble this afternoon, I put him out."

Frank could but admire the big fellow's coolness, and he laughed. Then he hastened to question the girl, from whom he learned that Jutland, as she persisted in calling the man, had forced his way into her room and threatened her. Almost as soon as she screamed, Browning appeared.

"The sly dog!" thought Frank. "He must have been hanging around close by, waiting for something to occur to give him a chance to see her."

While Frank talked with the girl, Bruce quietly disappeared. Finding he was gone, the girl said:

"He is such a noble fellow! You should have seen him, Mr. Merriwell. Why, he did not hesitate to seize the ruffian, and he handled him with such ease! It was wonderful! And he has gone away without giving me a chance to thank him. You must send him back here, that I may express my thanks."

So, when Frank left the room, he sought for Bruce, whom he found calmly smoking a cigarette outside the hotel, with the other boys near.

"Browning, you big rascal," said Merriwell, "Miss Harding wants to express her thanks."

"What for?" asked Bruce, in a surprised way.

"Why, for what you did, of course—for throwing Jutland out of the window."

"Oh, rats!"

With that Bruce calmly continued smoking.

"Marser Frank," said Toots, hesitatingly, "was tellin' ob de boys dat de bes' thing we can do is teh git out ob dis place right erway. Tek mah wo'd fo' it, sar, we's gwan teh git in an' awful heap ob trouble if we don't do dat."

"You are nervous, Toots. We can't run away and leave this young lady in such a position. We'll have to stay till she can get out of the town."

"Den some ob us is nebber gwan teh git out, yo' heah me! An' de chance am about fo' teh one dat I am dat pusson. Lordy! Lordy! I dunno why dis nigger ebber tried teh trabbel 'crost de country on a bisuckle!"

Later it was found that, strange though it seemed, the man who had been thrown out of the window did not appear to be seriously injured and had left the hotel.

While the boys were making inquiries concerning him, loud voices were heard in the barroom. Frank recognized the voice of the ruffian Handsome Bob, who was pounding the bar with his fist, as he hoarsely whooped:

"Whar is ther onery galoot as durst lay hands on my pard, Paul Hardin'? I'm lookin' fer ther critter, an' I'm goin' ter chaw him up when I finds him!"

"That's right!" shouted a short, chunky, dark-faced man, as he stood on his tiptoes, in order that he might also thump the bar with his fist. "I'm lookin' fer him,

too! Mr. Hardin' is my friend, gents, an' I stands by my friends."

"Thar, that'll do, Gentle Jimmy," warned Handsome Bob, with a sweeping wave of his arm. "Jest you keep your nose out o' this yar funeral, an' you'll enjoy better health. I'm ther man what does up ther tenderfoot that tackled Hardin', an' I don't keer fer no interferin' with my picnic—none whatever."

"All right, Robert," said Gentle Jimmy, submissively; "but while you're chawin' up him, I reckon I'll wade in an' chaw up all ther other tenderfeet. We might ez well make a clean job o' it, while we're about it. We can't afford ter hev tenderfeet come in yere an' run this yar town."

"Not any!"

"You bet not!"

"Well," said Frank. "That sounds like trouble. Where is Bruce?"

The big fellow had disappeared.

"We must stick together now," Merriwell declared. "It won't do to get separated. We'll find Bruce."

High and low they searched for him. An hour was spent in this manner. At the outset Frank went to

the room of the girl and asked if Browning had called there. He had been there a few moments before, but was not there then.

Frank fancied he noted something peculiar in the girl's manner. She was extremely nervous and excited, but this was not strange, after all she had passed through; but she did not seem to care to talk with him, and got rid of him as soon as possible, which appeared remarkable.

However, in his anxiety over Browning, Merriwell forgot this.

At the end of an hour he visited her room again. There was no response to his knock on the door. Again and again he knocked, but the door was not opened for him.

Then he tried the latch, and to his surprise, the door readily opened before him.

A dim light was burning in the room, but the girl was gone. Frank felt a sensation of astonishment and alarm shoot through his heart.

Hastening to turn up the lamp, he found, close beside it, a scrap of paper. There was writing on the paper, and, as he caught it up, he exclaimed:

"It is from Browning, sure as fate! What does it mean?"

This is what he read:

"DEAR FELLOWS: I am sure one of you will discover this before it can fall into the hands of any person who is not one of our party, and so I write it and leave it here. Miss Harding has absolutely refused to remain overnight in Buzzardsville. I have bought two horses, and we are going to get out of town without delay. When it is discovered we are gone, her enemy will suppose she has turned back toward the East, so we are going West, toward Poker Notch. Follow us in the morning, and have my bicycle shipped by stage. I shall stand by Miss Harding as long as she is in danger.

BRUCE."

Frank Merriwell could scarcely believe the evidence of his eyes. He stood staring at the note as if he were dazed.

After a time he started and muttered:

"Great governor! is it possible?"

He still seemed in doubt. He had come to know that Browning was "smashed" on Mabel Harding, but he had not dreamed that the girl would choose the big fellow to assist her in her wild project of flight from the camp.

"Why didn't she say something to me about it?" came from Frank's lips.

His pride had received a sudden and severe setback, and for the moment, to confess the absolute truth, he felt a twinge of jealousy.

But Merriwell was not like ordinary fellows, and that moment of jealousy was followed by a sensation of genuine satisfaction.

"By Jove!" he exclaimed, heartily. "I don't blame her! Browning is a fine fellow, and he does look rather handsome, now that he has ridden the superfluous flesh off him. The way in which he handled Jutland was enough to make any girl fall in love with him. I have had more than my share of the good things, and I'm not going to get raw when some other fellow gets ahead of me. Hurrah for Browning!"

Frank really was enthusiastic over his friend's success. To Merriwell it revealed a new side of the fellow's character, for Bruce had never seemed to care anything about girls.

But sober second thought made Frank shake his head.

"I'm afraid Bruce has made a big mistake in this

move. He doesn't know anything of the country, and Jutland will arouse the whole town when he discovers what has taken place. He'll say we are seeking to abduct his sister, and that is certain to arouse these rough men against us."

Merriwell's brain acted swiftly just then, and he soon decided what was the best thing to do.

First he sought for the key to lock the door of the girl's room, so any one could not enter and discover she was gone. The key was in the lock, which was very fortunate.

Extinguishing the light, Frank hastily left the room and locked the door.

Three minutes later he had found the boys and drawn them aside. In a low tone, he told them just what had happened.

"Wheejiz!" gasped Harry Rattleton, clutching at his heart. "Browning—has Browning run off with the girl?"

"He has."

"Well, I knew he was stuck on her, but I thought you had first call there. I didn't suppose he had a show."

"Doesn't this go to prove that she is crazy?" asked Diamond, seriously. "Only a crazy girl would do such a thing."

"Dat am right," agreed Toots. "No gal dat wasn't crazy'd evah think ob takin' nobody else when dey could git Frank Merriwell teh run erway wif 'em."

"And Bruce must have been a little daffy himself, or he would have let the whole of us into the game," said Harry.

"The girl must have been determined to get away, and Bruce feared I would object," said Frank. "That's why he did the thing in such a way."

"I am afraid it will turn out that the fellow she calls Jutland is her real brother," declared Diamond. "To me it seems there is something crazy about this sudden move of hers."

"What are we to do?" asked Rattleton.

"Follow them," answered Frank.

"How?"

"On our wheels."

"The whole town will know it."

"I think not."

"Why not?"

"We mustn't let them."

"How can we prevent it?"

"We must find a way to get our wheels and get out of the hotel without letting them know anything about it."

"I am afraid that will not be easy."

"Well, we'll try it, anyway."

"We'll have to settle with the proprietor. He's keeping those wheels as security for our board."

"I believe he can be fixed," said Frank. "Just keep out of sight, while I find him and have a talk with him."

Then Merriwell left them to look after the hotel-keeper.

In less than thirty minutes he was back, and he told them everything was all right.

"He will hold Browning's wheel, and ship it anywhere after hearing from us. I have settled with him, and have fixed it all right by giving him a fiver for his trouble. He seemed rather relieved to know we meant to get out, as he is afraid Handsome Bob and his gang will do us up if we remain here."

"He doesn't know the girl is gone?" asked Jack.

"Of course not. I didn't know what he might think about that, and so I kept still about it."

"That was all right, but when, where and how are we to get our wheels?"

"We are to get them right away from the back of the hotel. He will get them out for us."

Frank led the way, and they passed around the building. As they went under a window of the barroom, they could hear Handsome Bob still railing about tenderfeet and telling what he was going to do to a few who were in town.

"He is waiting to get good and drunk before he does anything," said Frank. "We will be gone when he starts to gun for us in earnest."

"Will we be able to find our way to Poker Notch in the darkness?" Harry anxiously inquired.

"We can't miss the way, the hotel proprietor says. There is but one road, and that is the regular stage trail."

Around at the back of the hotel they paused and waited. After a time a door was opened, and a man thrust his head out. Frank whistled softly, and then called:

"Bring out the wheels."

"All right," came back, in guarded tones.

Immediately he ran out one of the bicycles, which the boys were on hand to receive.

One by one the wheels were brought out, till all were there. Then Frank picked out Browning's wheel and told the man that was the one for him to keep.

"Don't let 'em know we are gone," said Frank. "Keep it till morning, as it will save us trouble."

"I'll keep still, don't yer worry about that. Good luck ter yer. Steer clear o' Buzzardsville in the future."

They kept away from the single street of the place as they crept along toward the western end of the town.

As they were leaving the vicinity of the hotel, a revolver was discharged six times in the barroom, and Handsome Bob was heard bellowing like a bull for the gore of tenderfeet.

"That fellow is a big braggart," said Frank, in disgust, "and he would be scared to death of a man he fancied was liable to do some shooting. The trouble

is that he might kill one or two of us before he found out we were not shaking our toenails off in terror."

"Land ob watermillions!" chattered Toots from the darkness near at hand. "Mah toenails am all right, but mah knees am so weak they'll hahdly hold up mah boady. I don't car' 'bout habbin' anything ter do wif no such pussons as dat Han'som Bob."

"I wonder where Jutland has kept himself ever since he left the hotel after recovering from his rough treatment by Bruce?" said Jack.

"I don't know," admitted Frank. "It strikes me that Handsome Bob is waiting for Jutland to return before he tackles us."

They were getting along finely, and had but one more building to pass. The ground was rough and uneven, so that it was necessary to pick their way along with great caution.

All at once Toots stepped on a rock that rolled under his foot, and with a yell of fear, the colored boy fell and rolled down the low, rocky bank, his bicycle rattling along after him.

"Oh!" cried Rattleton. "That's enough to arouse the whole town! Hang such a blundering nigger!"

Frank hurried down to where Toots lay and helped him to get up, asking:

"Are you hurt?"

"My gracious, I—I dunno!" chattered the darky. "I done stepped on somefin' dat moved an' frowed me down."

"Well, get up! Be lively! That yell of yours might have been heard all over town. It will be a wonder——"

"Hist!" came down from above. "Somebody is coming! We'd better make a break for it."

It was true. Several men were approaching, heading straight for the spot. Frank saw that the only thing to do was to run for it.

"Now you must keep on your feet and stick to us, Toots," he sternly said. "If you slip up now, you'll fall into the hands of the men of the town, and that means rough treatment."

A moment later he gave the word. Then, lifting their wheels, the four boys ran down the rocky slope, reached the road and prepared to mount.

Through the darkness the approaching men saw their movements, and at the same time from away

toward the hotel came wild howls of fury, as if Handsome Bob had made a discovery.

"He's found out we're gone, or the hotel-keeper has told him!" Frank said. "He is giving the alarm. The whole town will be after us in less than five minutes!"

"Hold on thar!" cried the approaching men.

"Ready!" cried Frank.

"All ready," came from his companions.

"Mount!"

Into the saddles they sprang, and away they went.

Again the men shouted at them, but they paid no attention to the cries.

CHAPTER XXXI.

THE LANDSLIDE.

"We's nebber gwan teh git out ob dis country wif ouah lives, chilluns!" chattered Toots, as he pumped away at his pedals. "The men out heah are heap sight wuss'n cowboys—yes, sar!"

Jack started to tell the colored lad that it was all his fault that they had been discovered while getting out of Buzzardsville, but Frank stopped that with a word.

"We are here to stick together, and not to growl at each other," he declared. "Any of us is liable to make a mistake. It had been discovered at the hotel that we were missing when Toots took his tumble."

The road was not of the kind to make riding pleasant, especially in the dark. It was rough and rocky, and it seemed wonderful that none of the boys sustained a severe fall in their first wild dash out of town.

Soon the road became ascending, and grew more difficult. It was not long before the four lads were forced to dismount and trundle their wheels.

By this time all were breathing heavily. When they paused a moment to look back they could see a few lights in the valley below, telling them where Buzzardsville lay.

The word came from Frank.

They listened.

"Hark!"

Co-latter! co-latter! co-latter!—the sound of galloping horses came from the trail below, telling them that mounted men were in pursuit. They heard hoarse voices calling to each other.

"They are after us hotfoot," said Frank, coolly. "We'll have to manage to give them the slip, if we can't run away from them on this road."

They hastened along as fast as possible, but the climb made them pant for breath, and they could tell that their pursuers were gaining steadily, which was rather discouraging.

However, after a time they came to the top of the ascent, so they were able to remount and ride onward.

They sent the machines flying over the rough road at a most dangerous speed, Frank leading.

It was a wild and reckless ride through the night,

but the boys demonstrated that a bicycle is better than a horse under such circumstances, for they finally eluded their pursuers.

Hours later, near morning, they reached Poker Notch, a town of five houses set amid the mountains.

Choosing the biggest of the houses, Frank proceeded to hammer on the door till some one was aroused. A window was opened, and the hoarse voice of a man demanded:

"Who are yer? and whatever do yer want? What be yer thumpin' 'round yere at this time o' night fer?"

"Is this Poker Notch?"

"It be."

"Where is the hotel here?"

"Ain't none."

"Well, then, where do travelers put up?"

"Ain't many travelers stops yere, but them as do, generally puts up with me. Who be yer?"

Frank explained that they were bicycle tourists from the East.

"Hey?" cried the man, suspiciously, and the boys saw a frowsy head thrust out of the window, so the man could get a look at them in the darkness. "Bi-

suckles? You ain't tryin' ter ride through this yar country on them things, be yer?"

Frank assured the astonished man that they were, and then made inquiries for Browning and the girl.

The man had not seen Bruce and Mabel.

"What does that mean?" anxiously asked Jack.

"It means that they are stopping at some other place in Poker Notch. As there is no hotel, it is probable they went to one of the other houses where they obtained accommodations."

"What shall we do—hunt them up?"

"Not before morning."

"That's right," said the man at the window. "It might not be healthy ter go hammerin' 'round some o' t'other places. Thar's Jake Ryan, why, he'd shoot at yer first, an' ask who yer was arterward."

"Then I think we will not disturb Mr. Ryan tonight," smiled Frank. "Come down and let us in. We will pay for accommodations."

"All right. Will be right down."

So they remained there till morning, and took breakfast there, after which, feeling sure Browning and

Miss Harding were in Poker Notch, Frank started out to look for them.

He returned in a short time, bringing the astonishing and disquieting information that the ones he sought were not to be found. It was certain they had not stopped in Poker Notch.

"Well, what do you think about that?" asked Jack Diamond, excitedly.

"One of two things is certain."

"What are the two things?"

"Either they continued straight through the place, or else they made a mistake at Buzzardsville and turned back eastward, instead of going this way."

"I'll think what I tell you—I mean I'll tell you what I think!" cried Rattleton. "I believe Browning is crazy, as well as the girl. If he hadn't been daffy, he'd never run off with her that way."

"Well, what are we to do?" asked Jack, in perplexity.

"I'll have to take time to decide," said Frank.

"And while you are taking time, Jutland, Handsome Bob and the rest of the gang from Buzzardsville will come over and take us."

Still it was foolish to make any move without consideration, they all knew.

Frank was not a little perplexed by Browning's action. He felt that Bruce should have consulted him.

"I'd given him a show with the girl," said Merriwell, mentally. "If she had seemed to care more for him than she did for me, he would have found me the last fellow in the world to get in his way."

While thinking it over, Frank wandered about the town. It was fortunate that he did so, for he came upon a bit of paper that lay on the top of a large boulder close beside the trail where it entered Poker Notch. The paper was held there by a small stone, and, fluttering in the wind, attracted Frank's attention.

As soon as he secured the paper, Merriwell saw there were a few words scrawled upon it with a lead pencil.

"Browning's writing!" he cried, with deep satisfaction. "He has been here! That point is settled."

With considerable difficulty, Frank made out the following words:

"Miss Harding fears Jutland, and refuses to stop in Poker Notch. We have gone on westward. Follow us. B."

"That is all I want to know!" cried Frank, as he hastened back to his friends.

It did not take the boys long to get out their wheels and start westward along the stage trail.

The road was rougher than the one over which they had been traveling. In places they were forced to dismount and literally carry their wheels.

Diamond followed Frank doggedly, without a word, while Harry tried to joke, but Toots complained bitterly.

"Nebber seen no such country as dis—nebber in all mah bawn days!" he grumbled. "Bigges' hills dat ebber growed anywhar. En how's we gwan teh git ober 'em, dat's what I wants teh know? I'll bet fo' dollars dis road comes to an en' away up heah in de hills, an' dat am all dar am teh it. Cayarn't no road ebber go ober such hills as dese. Tork about yeh Rocker Mount'ns—I sh'u'd say dey wuz! Nebber dreamed dar wuz so much lan' stuck up endways out heah—no, sir!"

"If you didn't talk so much, you'd have more breath," said Rattleton. "Keep your mouth closed, and give it a rest."

"G'way, boy! Don't git too lib'rul wif yo' advice, 'case yeh might cramp yehself bein' so generous. Mah mouf b'longs teh me, I's gwan teh use it when I wants teh."

"Then you can drop behind, so you won't bother the rest of us."

"I dunno. Who let you give ordars, sar? You ain't der only one, Mistah Rattleton. But I dunno's I car' fo' yo' comp'ny nohow, so I will drop behind, sar."

And Toots did so, following the others at a distance, and continuing to grumble and mutter.

The trail wound around the side of a mountain, with the ragged rocks hanging far above. Jack looked up, saw those rocks, and was about to make a remark about them, when there came a strange low sound from the mountain. The sound grew louder and louder, rapidly swelling into a roar.

"What is it?" shouted Rattleton, as the boys stood

with blanched faces, listening to that appalling and increasing volume of sound.

“A landslide!” cried Frank, as he pointed upward. “Look! look! The entire mountainside is rushing down upon us! We shall be overwhelmed! We are lost!”

CHAPTER XXXII.

OVER THE PRECIPICE.

Far above them the whole side of the mountain seemed to be moving, rushing downward toward the valley. Rocks, earth and trees were sweeping along, some of the latter remaining in an upright position, as they had grown.

"It is a landslide!" came chokingly from Jack.

Frank shouted to Toots:

"Look out—look out for the landslide!"

He waved his arms and pointed upward. The colored boy had been staring around to see where the roaring sound came from, and now, looking in the direction indicated by Merriwell, he saw the moving mountainside.

"Oh, mah soul!" wailed the darky, his face seeming to take on a grayish color. "De whole mount'n am runnin' erway for suah! An' it am gwan teh run right ober dis nigger!"

Literally shaking with fear, he closed his eyes and waited for the landslide to overwhelm him.

Frank, Jack and Harry made a desperate scramble to get out of the way, although such an effort seemed hopeless at first. However, they were able to clear themselves of the landslide, although Harry was barely successful in doing so, as the ground beneath his feet quivered and slid away with the rest of the mass, Jack having caught him by the collar and held him, while Frank saved his bicycle.

They looked for Toots, and were barely in time to see him disappear from view far below, being carried along on the very surface of the roaring slide, standing erect in an attitude of prayer.

"Poor boy!" came hoarsely from Frank's lips. "That is the last we'll ever see of him! He's gone forever!"

"That's right," nodded Diamond. "By the time the last of the slide reaches the foot of the mountain, he will be buried beneath tons of rock and earth."

"And I am to blame for it!" cried Harry, in deep self-reproach.

"How is that?" asked Frank.

"If I had not jumped on him about his grumbling, he would not have been so far behind us, and so he'd escaped with the rest of us."

"It simply happened that way, so I do not see that there is anything for which you can blame yourself. By staying behind he might have escaped the slide, had it come down on us. Let us be thankful for our own safety, and——"

His words were drowned by a frightful roar that came up from the valley far below, telling that the slide had reached the foot of the mountain, where it was piled in a chaotic mass.

"Poor Toots!" murmured Frank, a mist filling his eyes. "We little thought when he was saying he'd never live to reach San Francisco that he was speaking the truth."

"He was a white nigger," declared Diamond.

"That is right," agreed Rattleton. "I've had any amount of fun with that ducky. Say, Frank, this takes all the sport out of our tour. The fun is gone from it now."

"You are right," confessed Merriwell. "I do not

think I care about finishing the ride to the Pacific Coast. I am willing to put my wheel on board a train and go home."

"Are you going to make an attempt to recover Toots' body?"

"Of course I shall do whatever can be done, but it is not possible to do anything now. The road behind us has been destroyed by the slide, so there is no possibility of turning back. We must go on."

Go on they did, but it was a sorry party that went on. Their faces were sad, and their hearts were heavy with grief.

"It seems to me," said Diamond, "that all our troubles began when we first encountered that crazy girl, Miss Harding."

"Is it possible that you really think her crazy?" asked Frank.

"Something seems to convince me that she is. And I believe the chap who claimed to be her brother is all right."

"In which case, we are all wrong."

"Sure as fate."

"Wait—wait till we reach the next town and see what Browning has to say."

"We can't take any stock in anything he says," declared Rattleton. "He is daffy himself over the girl."

The road grew more and more dangerous as they proceeded. At last it wound around the side of the mountain, with a bluff of rocks on one side and a great precipice on the other. At the foot of the precipice, away down in the depths of the canyon, ran a small river, which looked like a tiny thread. The boys had paused to look down at the river and wonder if a person would be dead before the stream was reached in case they fell from the road.

At last Frank determined to see what he could do riding his wheel, as he was tired of trundling it along.

He mounted and started up the road, while Jack and Harry followed more slowly, still content to push the machines along.

Frank stuck to the job of riding up the road, difficult though it proved, till he came to a strip that was not

so hard, where it wound around a spur of the mountain.

Then it was that, once more, he heard a rumbling sound.

“Another landslide!”

The thought filled him with horror, and he looked upward, expecting to see the earth and rocks rushing down upon him.

To his surprise, he saw no landslide, although the rumbling continued, growing louder and louder.

Far behind him Jack and Harry were slowly toiling up the ascent.

At that point the road was very narrow and dangerous, having been blasted from the side of the mountain.

It seemed that Merriwell could feel the ground quiver beneath his bicycle, and yet he failed to discover the cause of it all.

Then, all at once, around the spur of rock came the regular stagecoach from the West.

But there was no driver on the box, and the reins flew loose, while the horses, freed from restraint and

urged onward by the weight of the heavy coach, the latter unchecked by the brake, were madly tearing along the dangerous road.

It was a sight to chill the stoutest heart.

Frank had little time for thought, as the horses were close upon him in a moment, their eyes glaring and foam flying from their lips.

There was no room to turn out, and to be run over by those horses and the heavy coach meant certain death.

What was to be done?

Whatever was done must be done quickly, as the boy realized. He saw death staring him in the face, and there seemed no way of avoiding it.

The bluff of rock, grim, forbidding, unscalable, lay to the right. To the left was the frightful precipice and the dark depths of the canyon.

Merriwell could not dismount and turn around, and there was not enough room to turn quickly without dismounting. If he were to try it, he would be beaten down and crushed beneath those hoofs and wheels before the task could be half accomplished.

A wild cry pealed from his lips—a cry he knew

would reach the ears of his friends and warn them of the danger.

There was something of farewell in that cry—something of despair.

Then like a flash Frank turned to the left and pedaled straight over the brink of the precipice!

CHAPTER XXXIII.

THE DEADLY MOUNTAINS.

Jack and Harry heard that cry. Already they had detected the rumbling sound, but they had not been able to tell whence it came.

Looking up the road, however, they saw the horses come into view, whirling the stage around the turn on two wheels. For a moment it seemed that the coach would go over into the canyon and drag the horses down, but this did not happen.

Instead, to their unutterable horror, they saw Frank pedal straight over the brink and disappear.

"Merciful Heaven!" gasped the young Virginian. "That is the end of him!"

"And it will be the end of us, if we do not give those horses a clear road!" shouted Rattleton. "Here is a bare chance! Quick—follow me!"

Off his wheel he leaped, ran it to the right-hand side of the road, where he flattened himself and the machine against the wall of rock.

Jack followed Harry's example, finding a place where it seemed possible that he might escape being struck by the wheels of the stage.

Scarcely were they in time. The stage flew past them seemed to brush them, and went careening down the trail.

Flattened against the rocks, two white-faced, shivering lads stood and watched the runaway coach till it disappeared.

Harry started to say something, but his voice choked and died in his throat. His bicycle fell over on the ground, and he sank down limply, burying his face in his hands.

Jack was stronger. He reached Harry's side, and his hand fell on the shoulder of the shaking boy.

"Brace up, old man! The stage has passed us, and we are all right. There is no further danger."

The face that Rattleton lifted was contorted with unspeakable anguish. He put out a quivering hand, and got hold of Jack's fingers, to which he clung.

"Frank!" he whispered.

Then Jack knew of what Harry was thinking, and his own heart was wrung with anguish.

Both boys turned and looked up the trail, Rattleton crouching on his knees. There seemed to be a hope in their eyes that they might see their friend and comrade somewhere up there—a hope that they had been deceived some way, and that Merriwell had not plunged over the brink of the precipice.

But the road was clear, and the one they looked for, the friend they loved and admired most in all the wide world, was gone.

Harry covered his face again, and Jack choked back the hard lump that arose in his throat.

“Gone!” came huskily from Rattleton; “gone forever!”

Jack could not speak. He lifted one hand to his head, still staring up the trail with a stony look.

Suddenly Harry turned to Jack, and almost shrieked:

“Do you understand—do you realize what has happened? Frank rode over the edge up there to escape from the runaway horses!”

“Yes.”

Diamond uttered the word mechanically.

Harry leaped to his feet, like a wild creature, and grappled with his companion, whom he savagely shook.

"Do you know what it means, man?" he screamed. "Do you understand that Frank dropped to his death when he rode over there? Are you in a trance?"

"Steady, Rattleton!" warned Diamond. "You are going crazy!"

"Well, isn't it enough to drive one crazy? Oh, merciful heavens! Think of it—Frank—Frank Merriwell, the whitest fellow who ever lived, the pride of Yale, gone to his death in a moment!"

"It is terrible!"

"Terrible! Man, it is awful! Why couldn't it have been one of us—why couldn't it have been me!"

And then the language that flowed from Rattleton's lips fairly appalled Diamond. Harry raved like a madman, ending by bursting into tears and again sinking limply to the ground.

"Come, old fellow," said Jack. "You must brace up, or we may never get out of these mountains ourselves."

"I don't care!" sobbed Harry. "I don't want to get out of the mountains! I believe we are doomed."

"And it is all because of that crazy girl," muttered the boy from Virginia. "She has brought us this luck. We have had nothing but the most frightful luck ever since we met her."

It was some time before they could recover at all from the fearful shock their nerves had sustained. Harry was weak and limp as a rag, seeming without strength to move at all.

"Come, come, Rattleton!" said Diamond. "I loved Frank Merriwell quite as much as you could have loved him, but I know we must not let his death overcome us in this manner."

There was a look of madness on Rattleton's sorrow-contorted face, as he shouted:

"You lie, Jack Diamond! You could not have loved him as I loved him! If you had, you would not be so calm! I roomed with him at Yale—we were chums. I knew him better than you knew him, and I know what a loss the world has sustained. It would not seem such a frightful thing if it had not come so suddenly."

"He may not be dead."

"He must be dead! No human being could fall

'down there and escape death. Oh, yes, he is dead—dead! Poor Frank!"

"Let's go up there and see—let's look over. It may be that he saw some way to escape, and that was why he rode over the precipice."

A ray of hope, faint and flickering, seemed to pierce Rattleton's grief-torn heart.

"Yes, yes!" he huskily whispered; "it may be—it may be! We will go up there and see. Come, Jack—come!"

They left their wheels and ran up the road, panting, stumbling, staggering. For all of his weakness of a short time before, Rattleton ran the faster and reached the spot first.

Then it was that Jack feared Harry was on the point of leaping over, and as he came up the Virginian clutched his friend and held onto him.

They lay down and peered over the face of the precipice. Below them for a little distance the wall was perpendicular, and then it sloped away till it dropped off again. Far down they could see the tops of trees, and away at the bottom of the canyon was the little

river; but nowhere could they see anything of Frank Merriwell.

Directly beneath them Jack saw a spot where some sliding body had torn through vines and bushes which grew along the face of the bluff, but that was all.

"It's no use, Harry," Jack forced himself to say. "He is gone."

"Yes, gone!" groaned Rattleton. "We'll never see him again! We may not be able to recover his body."

"It was fate."

"Fate!" shouted Harry. "There is no such thing as fate! You can't make me believe that it was foreordained that Frank Merriwell, the whitest fellow who ever lived, should die in such a manner! Don't talk to me of fate!"

For a long time Harry was very violent, and Jack watched him closely, fearing he might take a fancy to follow Frank Merriwell over the precipice.

Either Diamond was stronger than Harry, or did not bear such a passionate love for Frank Merriwell. After a time he was able to induce Rattleton to leave the spot.

"We must go on to the next town, from which we

may be able to send out men to recover Frank's body," said Jack. "Are you ready to go on?"

"I don't care," came mechanically from the other boy.

So, with Jack's arm about him, Rattleton was led back to the spot where the wheels were left. As he stood looking at them, a violent hatred for them seized upon him. He shook his fist at them, and screamed:

"You—you are to blame! You murdered him! If you had never been invented, he would not have been here! If I get out of these deadly mountains alive, I'll never ride again!"

Finally they picked up the wheels and wearily climbed the road, passing the fatal spot where Frank had taken his desperate drop, and going on around the spur.

Rattleton was calmer, but there was a fixed look of horror on his face—a look that made Jack shiver. Harry seemed changed from his old self to quite a different being. The face that had ever seemed jolly and laughing was now hard as stone, upon which lines of grief and despair were graven.

They rode away, and Jack took care to keep on the

dangerous side of the road, with Harry between himself and the bluff of rock.

Before they had gone a mile they came upon a man who was stretched on his back in the middle of the trail. That man was Budd Hunk, the stage driver.

It seemed rather remarkable that Hunk should be there, for he had left Buzzardsville on the west-bound stage, and it did not seem that he was due to return so soon. Jack leaped from his wheel and bent over the man.

"He is drunk," Diamond decided. "He must have lost control of the horses, and then fallen from the stage."

The smell of liquor was on the man, but, on closer examination, Diamond was horrified to find that Hunk was dead, his neck having been broken by the fall from the stage.

"Here is a temperance lecture!" Jack exclaimed. "The man has passed in his chips. And his death was caused by the fall, while the fall was caused by drunkenness."

"I tell you it is these deadly mountains!" cried Harry. "I have heard much about the beauty of the

Rocky Mountains, but I find nothing beautiful in them. They are savage and awful and deadly!"

After a time it was decided to draw the dead man from the trail and leave him beside the rocks. They could not carry him, and so the best they could do would be to send out a party from the next town to bring in his body.

This was done, and they mounted their wheels and rode onward again.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

THE FALL DOWN THE PRECIPICE.

Fully realizing that to escape death beneath the feet of the horses and the wheels of the coach meant almost sure death at the bottom of the canyon, Frank Merriwell had taken the plunge.

There was no time for deliberation. He was forced to act instantly if he hoped to avoid the horses.

In that moment of frightful peril he had thought of his friends who were behind, and had shouted to warn them of the danger that was rushing down upon them.

Then over the brink he plunged.

As he went over, Frank dropped from the saddle and tried to catch hold of the edge of the rocky wall, hoping to cling there till the horses had passed and his friends could come to his aid.

He missed the edge of the ledge and then he went shooting downward with a suddenness that seemed to suck the breath from his body.

He struck the wall where it sloped outward, slid

along swiftly, all the while trying to get hold of something.

Once his hands fastened on some bushes or vines, and his descent was checked for one brief moment.

Then the mass of vegetation parted from its frail hold on the earth that covered the rocks, and again he was sliding downward.

He caught a glimpse of his bicycle as it disappeared from view, and the thought came to him that he never would ride that wheel again. It would be smashed to pieces far below.

If the wheel should be smashed, surely he could expect to fare no better. He would not need it.

With his heart in his mouth, Frank made another desperate attempt to catch hold of something, anything that would check his downward rush.

At the very moment when he seemed on the point of taking the last fatal plunge, he succeeded in fastening his fingers in a crevice of the rocks, and there he clung, where he could look down into the depths of the canyon.

Away below him lay a mass of bowlders. To fall

on them meant death swift and sure, and there seemed no way of avoiding it.

A little on one side were some scrub trees, but how was he to reach them? Already his torn and bleeding fingers were relaxing, and he must go shooting downward once more before many seconds passed.

With a strength and energy born of despair, Frank worked himself to the right, clinging to the face of the precipice in a most marvelous manner.

A witness of that feat must have been overwhelmed with astonishment by the manner in which he stuck to the face of the precipice.

Little by little, inch by inch, he worked along. Now his feet dangled over that awful gulf, and yet he did not give up.

He saw a shelf or ledge that ran down along the face of the canyon wall. If he could reach it—what then? Surely it was too steep for him to obtain a foothold.

Then a bit of rock broke away beneath his fingers, and with a despairing gasp, he flung himself toward that shelf.

He struck it, and fortunately did not bound off into space.

Down the incline shelf he slipped, gaining momentum with each moment, and finding nothing to which he could fasten his fingers.

Frank had seen the end of the shelf below, and, almost before he could realize it, that end was reached.

Off the ledge he shot, still wildly clutching at anything he could reach.

Once more some scrub bushes that were growing from some dirt in the face of the wall enabled him to check his downward fall for a moment.

That moment was enough to enable him to get a breath—enough to give him time to regain his scattered wits.

But still the bottom of the canyon lay an appalling distance below, and there did not seem to be one chance in a thousand that he would reach it with the breath of life in his body.

The shelf had carried him beyond the mass of ragged rocks, and now he was dangling above the tops of trees that were growing away down there.

Crack! crack!—the bushes gave way!

There had been but the briefest warning, but that warning he took advantage of, making a swing toward a thicker mass of bushes some distance below.

Frank knew it would not do for his feet to strike against any obstruction, as that would be certain to send him whirling out from the face of the bluff, where there would be nothing to break his fall.

He tried to keep his feet away and get another hold with his hands.

Bushes whipped him in the face with a sting as of a hundred bees and cut through his hands as if they would sever his fingers.

He did not mind that. What if he lost both his hands, if he could save his life!

It was a battle of despair—a struggle against fate.

A mass of earth, torn out with the roots of bushes, rattled down about him, while pebbles and rocks of various sizes rained upon him.

Again and again he caught and clung for a moment, and the thought came that, if he could keep that up, he might reach the bottom with some life in his body, though he must be a torn and tattered wreck.

But at last he failed to grasp anything, he rolled

over, and his hands had been forced away from the face of the wall. Now it must be that he was lost.

Down, down he went. There was a sudden stop, and he felt himself suspended in the air, held thus by some portion of his clothing, which had caught on a rocky projection.

It seemed that this had happened to tantalize him, if anything, for he could feel the clothing giving, and he was sure he must take another plunge in a moment.

It was remarkable that Frank was able to keep his wits about him at all, but he did so.

Reaching backward over his head, he felt for something to which he could hold, and found a temporary grip for his fingers in a crevice.

Still farther to the right a small tree grew from the side of the bluff. If he could reach it——

“I’ll try!” came through his teeth.

Then he felt his clothing tear free of the rock, and, at the same time, he placed a foot against a projection of the wall, and, with a push into which he put all the energy possible, he flung himself toward the tree.

He struck it, crashed through it, and was flung outward by the springing boughs.

Over and over in the air whirled the boy as he made that last hair-lifting plunge.

Fortunately the spring of the small tree had hurled him far from the face of the precipice and directly toward the top of another tree some distance below.

Again the breath was forced from his lips and consciousness seemed to desert him for a moment during his dizzy drop. Then he struck the second tree.

Down through the branches he crashed, being unable to grasp any of them, as his strength seemed quite gone.

A stout bottom branch caught him, bent, sprang back and gave him another fling away out over the rocks.

Splash!—he struck in the stream of water.

Frank sank from view, and the water closed over his head.

Was that the end? Had he found death at last in the cold water of the little river away down there in the canyon?

No!

Up to the surface of the water he arose, gasping, choking—still alive!

It was a wonder—a marvel never to be explained.

But he was weak, and when he tried to reach the rocky shore he found himself unable to swim. He sank again, and again the water closed over his head.

The little river whirled on its mad career through the canyon, leaping and exultant, seeming to taunt the black precipice above, as if it felt certain of the human prey it had secured after all that mad drop from the heights of the winding road far up the mountain.

CHAPTER XXXV.

OUT OF THE DEPTHS.

Out from the town of High Pine went a party of men to secure the body of the dead driver, whom Jack and Harry had discovered on the trail.

Rattleton and Diamond were with the men, and they were determined to do their best to recover the body of Frank Merriwell. They had engaged some of the men to assist them, and a pack-horse bore on its back a load of rope, with which searchers were to be lowered into the depths of Black Canyon.

The body of the driver was found exactly as the boys had left it, and some of the men took charge of it, while others proceeded on the way to Black Canyon.

Harry and Jack were gloomy and sad, having little to say. As they approached the point over which Frank had made that mad plunge they were astonished to see a familiar figure sitting on a small boulder beside the trail.

"Look!" cried Jack, as he clutched Harry's arm.

"Is it possible? Am I going daffy myself, or is that——"

"Toots!" shouted Rattleton. "It is Toots, as sure as fate!"

The colored boy it surely was, looking somewhat battered and tattered, and his bicycle lay on the ground near him.

As he recognized Jack and Harry in the party, Toots arose to his feet, waved his cap about his head, and yelled:

"Bress mah soul! Heah yer is, chilluns! An' heah I is, too! I's sorter used up, but dis boy am still in der ring! It done takes a po'erful heap ter kill a nigger!"

The colored boy was so delighted by their appearance that he danced and capered, laughing and crowing. He embraced them, tears of joy running from his eyes. When the first paroxysms of delight had passed, he looked around inquiringly, as if he had missed some one, after which he asked:

"Whar am Marser Frank? He sho'ly oughter be heah."

Jack and Harry exchanged glances, and the colored

boy was quick to see a hidden meaning in their looks. His alarm flamed up in a moment, and he clutched Harry's arm, crying:

"What am it, boy—what am de mattah? Yo' don' mean teh tell me dat anyfing hab happened teh Marser Frank? Don' yo' tell me dat, sar."

"Yes," said Harry, "something has happened to him."

Toots fell back, his eyes glaring, while a grayish paleness overspread his face.

"What has happened?" he huskily whispered. "Nuf-fin' ser'us, I hope? If anyfing ser'us has happened teh dat boy, I's gwan ter be sorry dat alverlanch didn' quarry me sebenteen mile undah groun', 'stead ob tak-in' me do'n the mount'n all safe! If Marser Frank am daid, I don't car' ter lib no longah mahself!"

"I am afraid Frank is dead," admitted Harry.

Then he told the colored boy what had happened, and Toots' anguish was pitiful to witness. He sobbed and moaned, wringing his hands as if his heart were breaking, while tears gushed from his eyes.

"Po' Marser Frank!" he wailed. "Nebber wus an-nodder boy lek dat boy! Dar ain't no reasum fo' livin'

no mo'! All de bright hab gone out ob de sunshine, an' de singin' ob de birds won't be music no mo! Dis am de blackes' day ob mah life!"

It was useless to try to comfort him, and the boys gave up trying, for it wrung their hearts to witness the anguish of the simple, true-souled black boy who had loved Frank so much.

It was not far to the place where Frank had taken the frightful plunge, and they went forward again. When the spot was reached, arrangements were made for one of the men to be lowered into the canyon.

Jack wanted to go down—he insisted on it. Harry had no desire to go, fearing to see what he fully expected away down there. The men thought it was not best that Jack should go, but he insisted, and, as they were in the employ of the two boys, they agreed.

So, when all arrangements were made, one end of the rope was securely knotted under Diamond's arms, and he was lowered over the precipice.

Harry waited for the result, talking with Toots, when the colored boy could find words between his sobbing to say anything. In this manner Harry managed to obtain from the colored boy a broken account

of his marvelous ride down the mountain on a landslide. By a singular circumstance, it had happened that the darky had not been overwhelmed and buried beneath the slide. As soon as he could recover, Toots had found his bicycle, having seen one of the wheels protruding from the ground, and had sought to follow on after his friends.

While they were talking, there came a signal from below for the men to pull up on the rope.

Harry was quivering with apprehension, fearing to see what he expected would be drawn up from the canyon.

Steadily the men toiled away, drawing up the rope. At last they drew something over the edge of the precipice to the road.

That something was Frank's bicycle.

A breath of relief escaped Harry's lips when he saw it. Then he turned away again, huskily whispering:

"This simply prolongs the agony. If Jack found the wheel so soon, it is pretty sure he has succeeded in finding Frank's body. That will come next."

The rope was lowered. After some delay, the signal

came for them to draw up on it once more, and they set about doing so.

"This time there is something heavier than a bicycle hitched on down there," said one of the men.

Harry had no doubt; it must be the body of his friend.

"Easy!" he gasped—"be easy with it! Do not let it scrape on the rocks! It must be torn and battered enough now."

Slowly and steadily the men worked. The rope was coiled as they drew it in. Two of them were looking over the brink, and they uttered strange exclamations. Finally, having cautioned the men who were pulling at the rope to go slow, they reached over and took hold of something, which they gently lifted over the edge.

Harry forced himself to look at it, and then——

"Bress de Lawd! bress de Lawd!" came the wild cry from Toots.

The colored boy rushed forward and clasped in his arms the person who had been drawn up from the depths of Black Canyon.

And that person was Frank Merriwell alive!

* * * * *

That night, in the town of High Pine, Frank told them the story of his desperate drop and wonderful escape from death. He told it as well as he could, but to himself it was something hazy and unreal. But for his bruised body, his torn and bandaged hands, he might have fancied it all a weird and horrible phantasma of his brain.

To Frank it seemed that the hand of Providence had shielded him from death on the rocks at the bottom of Black Canyon. It seemed that the onward rush of the waters had finally cast him upon the bank where Jack found him just recovering consciousness.

"The only thing that troubles me now is to know what has become of Bruce and Miss Harding," said Frank. "It is remarkable that you did not find them here, and it is still more remarkable that no one saw them pass through this town. I am worried about them. If that girl really is crazy——"

"Hark!" cried Jack, springing to his feet. "Some-

body is doing some shooting, and they are coming this way!"

They rushed out, just as two horses dashed up to the front of the building and stopped. Down from one of the horses sprang a familiar figure, and, a second later, Browning lifted Miss Harding from the other horse, and bore her into the building.

Another young man, mounted on a third horse, had swung about a short distance away, and, with a revolver in either hand, was shooting into the gathering darkness toward some pursuers. It was a pistol duel, but it was very brief, for one of the pursuers was seen to tumble headlong from his horse, while yet another sank forward and clasped his animal around the neck in a manner that indicated he was wounded.

Then, unable to face that fire, the pursuers turned and beat a hasty retreat.

As soon as he saw this, the young man who had done the shooting sprang down from his horse, crying:

"My sister—where is she? Is she harmed? If those dogs have touched her with one of their bullets, I'll not rest till they are all hanged!"

"His sister?" cried Diamond. "Is it Jutland?"

"Not much!" exclaimed Frank. "It's quite a different fellow."

Then they followed the young man into the building, where Bruce was found, doing his best to calm Mabel Harding, who was rather hysterical.

As soon as the girl saw the youthful stranger, she leaped to her feet, rushed to him, clasped him about the neck, crying:

"Paul—Paul, my dear brother!"

"Mabel, you are not harmed—those dogs did not touch you with their lead?"

"No, no! I feared for you alone."

"I am all right, but I fancy I have given at least one of them his just deserts."

Frank found Browning from whom he demanded an explanation of this most bewildering affair.

"Where have you been, Bruce?" he demanded. "And where did you run across this new brother of Miss Harding?"

"He is not a 'new' brother," declared the big college lad. "He is her real brother. Jutland was an impostor, as she claimed."

Then Bruce hurriedly made an explanation. 'After

passing Poker Notch, at which place the girl had refused to stop, fearing they would be pursued and overtaken, they met a mounted man on the road. The man spoke to them, and, in the darkness, Mabel recognized the voice of her brother. It was a wonderful meeting, and when Paul Harding had heard her story he insisted on turning back to Buzzardsville at once. This Bruce was willing to do, as he expected to find his friends there, or meet them on the road. And when they passed back through Poker Notch, the boys were already there, a fact which Browning never dreamed.

Paul Harding told how Joe Jutland had lured him into the mountains and tried to kill him, after robbing him, by flinging him into an abandoned shaft. It had not killed him, and he had succeeded in dragging himself from the shaft. How he reached a small mining camp was more than he could tell; but he did so. There he was nursed in a rude way by an old miner, and he recovered. As soon as he was able to do so, he started for Buzzardsville, with the intention of squaring his account with Jutland. On the road he met Browning and Mabel.

When Paul had heard Mabel's story, he was more

than ever determined to visit retribution on Joe Jutland.

Back to Buzzardsville they went. In that town an encounter between Harding and Jutland took place, and Harding dropped Jutland with a bullet.

Jutland, who was known in Buzzardsville as Paul Harding, having seen fit to call himself that, had some friends of the Handsome Bob order, and so it came about that the real Paul Harding was forced to take to flight, with his sister and Browning, after the shooting.

They were pursued into High Pine, where Harding made a stand, causing one of the pursuers to bite the dust and the others to retreat.

"Well," said Frank, when he had listened to Browning's hurried story, "all this is very remarkable and astonishing; but I rather fancy we'll be able to tell you something quite as astonishing."

Some of the men of High Pine went out and brought in the fellow who had been shot from his horse.

It proved to be Handsome Bob, and the ruffian was quite dead.

"He never will be missed," declared a citizen of

High Pine. "He wuz one o' ther wust p'izen skunks what ever lived, an' thar ain't nobody goin' ter make much fuss over his death. I ruther reckon ther coroner will say as how it came from accidental shootin', ther shooter bein' unknown."

And that was exactly the verdict the coroner rendered.

The boys remained in High Pine three days, long enough for Frank to recover in a measure from the injuries he sustained in his fall into Black Canyon—long enough for Bruce Browning to make a warm friend of Mabel Harding, which he did.

Browning's wheel was sent over from Buzzardsville, and with it word came that Joe Jutland, although seriously wounded, would recover.

"Well, I am glad of that," confessed Paul Harding. "For all of what he has done to me, I do not care to have his blood on my hands. I am calmer now than I was when I did the shooting."

Frank Merriwell's wheel had struck in the top of a tree when it fell into Black Canyon, and, although it was injured somewhat, the boys were able to put

it into shape so that it could be ridden to some large city where Merriwell could obtain another bicycle.

“Land ob watermillions!” cried Toots. “I dunno’s it’s pawsible fo’ anyfing teh knock out dis gang. Ebry time we git frowed down, we lights right onter ouah feet, chilluns—’deed we does. But I’s gwan teh be a mighty happy nigger when we git out ob dis yar country, an’ gits back whar cibilized pussons lib—yes, sar!”

THE END.

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